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Why HBCUs Are Key to Fighting Antisemitism

*Mending the friendship between black and
Jewish Americans*



AM GOING to be like a pit bull. That is the way I am going to be against the Jews. I am going to bite the tail of the honkies.” So spoke Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam to a crowd of nearly 2,000 at Howard University in the spring of 1994. It wasn’t the first time Muhammad had been invited to speak on Howard’s campus. As the *Washington Post* reported at the time, “In the last few weeks, Howard has drawn national media attention as a series of visiting speakers and a few students made antisemitic and racist remarks.” Howard’s president, Franklyn G. Jenifer, resigned three days later amid the controversy, leading at least one student to worry, “We probably will get an Uncle Tom now who will stymie free speech on campus.”

But free speech had already been stymied on campus several weeks earlier. A lecture by Yale historian David Brion Davis had been canceled for fear it would cause unrest. Davis, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Problem of Slavery* trilogy, had arguably done more than any other historian of his generation to inspire the cultural reckoning over America’s slave-centric past. What made Davis, the great scholar-champion of abolition, persona non grata on campus? As the *New York Times* reported, university administrators feared that he “would be subjected to heckling and harassment because he is Jewish.”

There is something telling in the fact that the pathology of contemporary campus antisemitism we are now seeing was foreshadowed at Howard 30 years ago. Whether it is the drug epidemic, hip-hop culture, or antisemitism, black culture—the positive, the negative, and the neutral—forecasts the future of American culture. The sad truth is that anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment infiltrated certain HBCU campuses long ago, and black–Jewish relations have not recovered. Writers such as David Christopher Kaufman and Al-Tony Gilmore have suggested that it is the absence of Jewish students at HBCUs that explains why there have only been protests rather than encampments on these campuses. Howard students, for instance, joined the encampment at nearby George Washington University, known for its large Jewish population.

I witnessed the change in campus attitudes toward Jews in my own family. My parents, who had attended Howard in the 1960s, had very warm and positive feelings for the Jewish community. My brother attended an HBCU in the late ’80s and graduated with a very different view. So what happened in the 25 years between my parents’ experience at Howard University and my brother’s experience at an HBCU?



My parents arrived at Howard with different backgrounds. My father grew up in Charlottesville, Virginia, under the South's Jim Crow laws. My mother grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Philadelphia. While their experiences with Jews differed, they shared a genuine affection and admiration for the Jewish community and Israel.

My father heard stories about William Goodwin, a Jewish doctor and the former head of the University of Virginia Hospital. In the 1930s, Dr. Goodwin promoted my grandfather from a janitor to a manager, making him the first black man to hold a leadership position at the hospital. As a result, my grandfather was responsible for hiring many local black people, making him one of the most powerful black men in Charlottesville. My grandfather was grateful to Dr. Goodwin and admired his commitment to challenging discrimination.

Born in 1896, my grandfather became a faithful patron of Sears, Roebuck and Co. Its owner, Julius Rosenwald, was a Jewish philanthropist who had been persuaded by his two friends, Marcus Goldman and Samuel Sachs, to endow the Tuskegee Institute, the first institution of higher learning for African Americans. Together, Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington built more than 5,000 schools for black children throughout the rural South. Notable graduates of Rosenwald schools include Maya Angelou, John Lewis, and Medgar Evers (all of whom today have schools named after them). My father arrived at Howard University knowing that Jews were partners in the struggle against Jim Crow and that they had invested not only in his family but in black communities throughout the South.

My mother's church was in an old synagogue building. Every day before class, she and her classmates recited scriptures from the Old Testament. After school, she enjoyed jaunts to Mrs. Fisher's deli for a beloved kosher pickle. More than 70 years later, my mother still fondly recounts the kindness of her neighbors, the Freedman brothers. These

five bachelors owned various local businesses and doted on my mother. They paid her to run errands and surprised her with saltwater taffy when they returned from Atlantic City. She had close and personal relationships with Jewish people who were part of her daily life.

Arriving at Howard University during the height of the civil rights movement, my parents had professors who were Jewish—many of whom had fled the Nazis in the 1930s and '40s and continued their scholarship at Howard and other HBCUs. They even had Jewish classmates who were kept out of predominantly white colleges and universities because of discriminatory quotas. My parents felt a sense of shared purpose with their Jewish peers, and it was on HBCU campuses that blacks and Jews worked together to dismantle Jim Crow and all forms of racial discrimination. My parents observed and benefited from the Jewish ethos of continually striving to improve the world, even at their peril.

Following the civil rights movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and the 1968 riots, middle-class and professional blacks started moving away from cities and into predominantly white suburbs. By the early 1980s, the offshoring of manufacturing jobs had a devastating effect on black men who had only completed high school or vocational education. Additionally, the crack-cocaine epidemic and the accompanying rise in crime affected most black families and ravaged our communities. By the 1990s, the results of President Lyndon B. Johnson's failed War on Poverty had devastated the black family. In 1950, the percentages of white and black women who were married were roughly the same, 67 percent and 64 percent, respectively. By 1998, the percentage of married white women had dropped by 13 percent to 58 percent while the marriage rate among black women had dropped by more than three times that rate, to 36 percent. The declines for males were parallel: 12 percent for white men and 36 percent for black men. The growth

of the welfare state under President Johnson crippled black families. Housing programs and food assistance were designed to support a mother and a child, replacing a black husband and father with a government-issued check. These policies made it more economically advantageous to be a single mother than a wife and mother.

Owing to the exodus of the black professional class and the broken promises of LBJ's Great Society, the most vulnerable black Americans were susceptible to radicalization by militant groups such as the Black Liberation Army (BLA), a faction of the Black Panthers. The BLA promoted killing police officers and confiscating funds from capitalists and imperialists to support their revolution. This rhetoric formed the basis for Louis Farrakhan's anti-Israel, antisemitic, Jew-hating platform. He fed the black community antisemitic tropes: Jews were responsible for the transatlantic slave trade; Jews controlled the economy, the government, and the press; Jews pulled the strings on black leaders. While it was often laced with antisemitic venom, the rebellious, empowering message that Farrakhan delivered captivated students who were the beneficiaries of the civil rights movement.

However, Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam did not confine their message to the cities or its prison ministry; he delivered it to elite black students at the nation's most prestigious HBCUs, including Howard, Hampton, Morehouse, and Spelman. His rhetoric found disciples among black America's best and brightest. Before an earlier Khalid Muhammad speech, a Howard Law School student named Malik Zulu Shabazz, led the audience in a call and response:

“Who caught and killed Nat Turner?” he shouted.

“Jews,” some in the crowd responded.

“Who was it that controls the Federal Reserve? Who?”

“Jews.”

In the 1980s, HBCUs were havens for black excellence, but they became breeding grounds for revenge history or alternative narratives. Inside the classroom, students learned about the outstanding achievements of blacks across multiple disciplines: the sciences, medicine, politics, and economics—accomplishments that had been left out of their public-school textbooks. During school breaks, my brother would tell me about black pioneers like Marcus Garvey, an early black nationalist and Pan-Africanist, Madam C.J. Walker, the first self-made female millionaire in America, and others not included in my public-school curriculum, even during Black History Month. As a result of these new facts and perspectives, my brother and other HBCU students were more open to messages casting Jews as the oppressor rather than the oppressed.

Outside the classroom, young men from the Nation of Islam sold *Final Call*, the Nation of Islam's official newspaper. They distributed pamphlets criticizing the white man's capitalist system—a system responsible for slavery, destroying black communities with drugs, and denying black men the educational and financial means to support their families. They maligned Jews as capitalist overlords who denied black men the ability to thrive in their communities. Before today's progressives arrived on Ivy League campuses, Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, preaching at HBCUs, had already sown the seeds of discord and hatred for America, capitalism, and Jews.

Donning their signature bow ties, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam activists proselytized at HBCUs. Their message was provocative and compelling. Unlike the civil rights leaders, Farrakhan did not appeal to white men's better angels or threaten their economic interests. He spoke directly to black people, black men in particular. He preached the importance of self-reliance, self-discipline, and self-respect as necessary for black men to liberate themselves from a

system largely controlled by Jews. The message appealed to several black audiences. It encouraged incarcerated black men and offered hope to black Americans who had the least education, skills, and resources, those who had been forgotten in the promise of integration. Farrakhan's message of black empowerment was also embraced on the campuses of black America's most elite universities.

Farrakhan inspired a new generation of educated and even affluent black students who had become disaffected, disillusioned, and critical of integration. These new black elites grew up in the suburbs and attended predominantly white schools. Many of them chose to attend HBCUs specifically to escape white people for four years.

My older brother was one of those disaffected students. He began elementary school in a predominantly white private school. When he transferred to public school, he was regularly harassed and bullied by white students. His neighborhood nemesis vandalized his prized moped. I remember my father taking him to the front yard to teach him how to box to defend himself. By the time my brother graduated from high school, he considered attending an HBCU as a refuge from the disrespect he had encountered while growing up around primarily white people.

During his school breaks, I noticed that he had become militant and hostile toward the fundamentals of America's strength: capitalism, the military, and the justice system. He was distrustful of American power and the people who wielded it. He had a palpable suspicion of Jews, even though he could count on one hand the number of Jews he knew personally. He suggested that Jews had too much wealth and influence in the world and that Israel had undue influence over America's foreign policy. His perspective had shifted away from our Christian upbringing, which taught that "all things are possible with God," and he became suspicious of people at all levels of power and influence. He embraced a fatalistic view that "the system" only strengthened the

powerful and oppressed the weak. He had become sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and suspicious of Zionism.

However, it wasn't just Farrakhan or the Nation of Islam that brought about this change. There was social and cultural drift that happened between blacks and Jews. Without quotas that once barred Jews from predominantly white colleges and universities, Jews no longer had to attend black colleges or graduate programs. With desegregation and the elimination of restrictive covenants that barred blacks and Jews alike from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, our communities drifted apart. To my brother, Jews became indistinguishable from whites. In the absence of social, academic, and personal familiarity and knowledge, my brother and his cohort were primed for Farrakhan's empowerment message and his antisemitic venom.

My family initially dismissed my brother's opinions as the typically provocative views of a newly educated college student. Admittedly, at the time, it was cool to be defiant, countercultural, pro-black, and even anti-white, which rapidly became synonymous with anti-Jewish. In college, his education and experience shifted from one about names and dates to concepts, in particular the concept of power—who has it and who doesn't. As a result, he perceived blacks as powerless and whites and Jews as powerful. We have seen the same shift in mindset at our most elite universities. I realized that my brother's ideas were not the temporary musings of a college student; they were the early signs of an antisemitism that went unchecked and unchallenged for more than 25 years at HBCUs. Now these ideas have spread to America's top colleges and universities. As a result, antisemitism and anti-Israel propaganda have been normalized on predominantly black as well as white campuses across America.

So how can HBCUs contribute to the fight against antisemitism? How can our communities reinvigorate the long-neglected black and Jewish alliance, address misunderstandings, and rebuild trust? How do we celebrate our past accomplishments and pursue future objectives together?

First, it is necessary to realize that most people under the age of 70, whether black or Jewish, have little or no knowledge of our respective communities' long history of fighting racism and discrimination together. They certainly didn't live it as my parents did. Some HBCUs including Dillard University in Louisiana, Voorhees University, and South Carolina State University offer classes on how HBCUs helped support Zionism and how Jews helped support the NAACP and other black civil rights organizations and efforts. While students may be familiar with specific historical events, such as the tragic murders of Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, as depicted in the movie *Mississippi Burning*, we need a concerted effort to resurrect this history and build on it for the sake of both communities. Many people know that the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement were Christian-led efforts, but their inspiration was as Jewish as a Passover seder. Both movements drew on the stories and principles of the Hebrew scriptures. Jewish principles of justice, equality, and humanity have been infused into every social movement in this country. It is time to celebrate and remember more of these unsung heroes.

Education is the key. It is vital to establish chairs, fellowships, and scholarships in the name of Jewish civil rights pioneers such as Julius Rosenwald, Andrew Goodman, and Elie Wiesel at HBCUs. We should have libraries and buildings on campuses named in honor of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a close friend and ally of Martin Luther King Jr., to commemorate their bond and friendship in the struggle for human dignity in America. Yale's Gilder Lehrman Cen-

ter for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, for example, was founded by a Jewish scholar (the aforementioned David Brion Davis) and bears the name of two Jewish philanthropists. There's no reason why such a center shouldn't be at an HBCU, and every reason that it should be. Additionally, we need an integrated civil rights curriculum that showcases black leaders and highlights their allies and friends, such as Jack Greenberg, who represented Martin Luther King Jr. and second-chaired Thurgood Marshall in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Books like Kenneth Chelst's *Exodus and Emancipation* should be required reading.

From the abolition of slavery through the civil rights movement to today, the Jewish community has remained committed to eliminating the scourge of discrimination wherever it appears. In America's long struggle to achieve its highest ambition—equal justice under the law—whether it was abolishing slavery, rescinding Jim Crow laws, championing gay rights, or fighting anti-Asian hate, Jews have always been there, fighting for the rights of others.

We can honor the enduring partnership between the black and Jewish communities by establishing lasting endowments to celebrate our accomplishments in pursuing freedom, opportunity, and equality for all Americans.

Second, Jews need to help black people understand Jewish life and how being Jewish is different from being white. My grandfather understood the Jewish character. He understood their fears and their motivations. He knew Dr. Goodwin shared his values—to be recognized and valued for the sake of basic human dignity. My parents had personal experiences with Jews, interacting with them as professors, fellow students, neighbors, and friends. After the 1968 riots, it was not just middle-class blacks who left the cities. Jews left, too; maybe they kept their businesses, but they left the community and created a wider chasm between the two communities. Jews moved from their

traditional neighborhoods in the cities to white suburbs or created new communities outside the cities. Blacks and Jews lost their shared sense of community. We can get it back now, and HBCUs are a great place to start. We need more Jewish professors teaching at HBCUs. We need to create opportunities for black and Jewish students to interact and socialize with one another. There are many untapped opportunities for this. Washington, D.C., is home to not only two HBCUs but several universities with very sizeable Jewish populations. What about metro-area Shabbat dinners and barbeques hosted at different campuses? These events could be themed or otherwise designed to be both educational and social.

Today, the average HBCU student would probably not distinguish whites from Jews, except to note that Jews tend to have more wealth and influence than white people. Some would even consider Jews a greater threat to them based solely on that idea. This is troubling because it is unfounded, yet many HBCU students believe it to be true. Over the past 30 years, there has been no credible opposing narrative to counter many of these stereotypes or the prevalent pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel, antisemitic rhetoric on HBCU campuses. Students for Justice in Palestine, which boasts some 200 chapters, is active on the campuses of Howard University, Hampton University, and the Atlanta University Center, which includes Clark Atlanta, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and the Morehouse School of Medicine. It's also important to recognize the increased number of Arab and Muslim students, some born in the United States, others from abroad, who now attend these colleges and universities. Their experience and perspective also influence the culture and mindset of these universities and their students. It is crucial to educate black students about our true shared history. Let's create space for these students to ask difficult and uncomfortable questions and understand challenging truths about Israel. Let's provide these students with knowledge and firsthand experiences in

Israel, including interactions with Jewish, Christian, and Arab Israelis, as well as Jewish Americans residing in Israel. Such opportunities could be formalized as fellowship programs.

Third, HBCUs need consistent and equitable public funding. In September 2023, the U.S. secretaries of education and agriculture jointly sent letters to the governors of 16 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. They urged the governors to provide equal funding for the HBCU land-grant institutions in their states. Between 1987 and 2020, these HBCUs received about \$13 billion less than their non-HBCU counterparts, despite states' legal requirements to provide equitable funding to all land-grant universities. For example, the HBCUs Tennessee State, North Carolina A&T, and Florida A&M had each received about \$2 billion less in state appropriations than their traditionally white counterparts: the University of Tennessee–Knoxville, North Carolina State, and the University of Florida.

The value of HBCUs would increase exponentially if they had more resources to implement the initiatives outlined above, perhaps more than we can even possibly predict. To end with an illustrative anecdote, John Biggers, whom Maya Angelou called “one of America’s most important artists,” famous for his powerful mural depictions of African-American and African life, entered the historically black Hampton Institute in 1941 with the goal of becoming a plumber, a reliable profession that would help support his family and widowed mother. He registered for an evening art class taught by Viktor Lowenfeld, a Jewish refugee artist and teacher who impressed upon his mostly black students the beauty in their heritage, and the importance of taking pride in it. Lowenfeld’s mentorship changed the course not only of Biggers’s life but of African-American art. He encouraged Biggers to become an

art major and, ultimately, a great artist and art educator himself. The two maintained a lifelong friendship, and Angelou marveled at how Biggers “leads us through his expressions into the discovery of ourselves at our most intimate level.” Imagine the loss for human, and specifically black, creativity had Lowenfeld and Biggers not found themselves and each other on an HBCU campus as the war raged in Europe.

How many such consequential encounters are failing to happen as we wait? *