

Friend or Foe: Blacks and Jews in America

By Dan Lehrer

"In Germany, the Jews are the minority surrounded by a majority which carried out against them rather heinous crimes. In America, it is we who are the Jews. It is we who are surrounded by a hostile majority. It is we who are under constant attack. There is no need for black people to wear Stars of David on their sleeves; the Star of David is all over us. In this nation a situation exists where black people, being powerless, are seeking to gain a degree of power over their lives and in the institutions which affect their lives. It so happens that in many of those institutions, the people who hold power are Jews. Now in the attempt to gain power, if there is resistance by Jews to that, then of course blacks are going to respond."

THIS STATEMENT BY JULIUS Lester in 1967 is indicative of a changing relationship and consciousness between Blacks and Jews towards the end of the Civil Rights Movement. In a sense, the title of Benjamin Ginsburg's book *Fatal Embrace*, on Jews in America, could very well be a metaphor for the state of Black Jewish relations today. While both groups are dependent upon each other for their survival as leaders and recipients of the modern liberal, democratic state, their relationship is also in a number of ways self-destructive. Blacks and Jews are united in a coalition of contempt and cynicism, an embrace which Blacks in particular refuse to acknowledge and which neither group can afford to destroy. Yet the fear of many scholars is that the grudging embrace is actually the embrace of the condemned, falling to their doom.

The 1992 survey by the Anti-Defamation League on anti-Semitism and prejudice in America found that black Americans were more than twice as likely as whites to fall into the most anti-Semitic category. Moreover black politicians and intellectuals have been far more willing than their white counterparts to accuse Jews of conspiring

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against blacks or to voice anti-Jewish views. For example Louis Farrakhan, in a recent speech at Michigan State University told Jews in the audience, "You suck the blood of the black community, and you feel we have no right to say something about it" (Hentoff A21). Similarly, CCNY professor and chair of

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the Black Studies Department, Leonard Jeffries openly teaches his students about the secret Jewish conspiracy in the University and in the country. Finally, during the recent Crown Heights incident, black politicians openly condoned and excused the anti-Jewish rioting and subsequent murder of a Jew by blacks, as justifiable revenge for the first incident.

These trends are only a reflection of the latest stage of a relationship which has been half a century in the making. Given its past history, the present relationship between Blacks and Jews is tragic. What Nathan Glazer called the "Grand Alliance" between Jews and Blacks during the Civil Rights Movement no longer exists. The current rantings and appeal of Khalid Muhammed, Al Sharpton, and Sonny Carson can no longer be discounted as an immaterial and isolated lunatic fringe. They offer insight into the depth of the mutual suspicion, anger, and contempt between Blacks and Jews which thirty years of frustration and failure have spawned. The circumstances which drove the "alliance" to destruction has been the subject of countless books and articles. Historians and sociologists from Cruse to Lipset and Glazer to Ginsberg

have offered insights on the subject. They have explained the phenomena in economic, cultural, political, and personal terms. However the split in the alliance can not be determined as long as those who record and analyze the shared history of Blacks and Jews in modern America succumb to close minded elitism or self righteous paranoia. The history and present situation of Blacks and Jews is baffling in its complexity, so much so, that it often evades rational, intellectual debate and encourages emotional demagoguery or flip castigations.

The fall of the alliance was the product of a number of trends and developments in the black and Jewish communities and society as a whole. One of the major engines of anti-Semitism in the black community has been the use of anti-Semitic propaganda in internal black politics as a means of de-legitimizing entrenched black leadership. Perhaps even more deleterious to the cultural and political coalition was the innate difference in the long-term aims and goals of Blacks and Jews for the future of Civil Rights. This incompatibility was and is the product of vastly different cultural and socio-economic situations of each group in America. Finally, there is an organizational element to the conflict, existing within the Democratic party. As blacks gained more power, they demanded more political influence. Often this struggle became one against Jewish "hegemony" and dominance in the party.

While the deterioration of the political alliance and cultural identification between Blacks and Jews is an inevitable diversion in the interests of two distinct and separate groups, the prevalent anti-Semitism which accompanied that split was not pre-destined. In fact, it is the result of a growing and ever more popular cynicism and opportunism in the black community. To fully understand and appreciate the present tensions and opposition which exists between the two communities one must first understand the motives and forces which drove blacks and Jews to coalition in the pre-civil rights and civil rights era; some of the same motives and forces which would later set the stage for the fall.

COOPERATION AND CONFLICT: THE BEGINNING AND END OF ALLIANCE; THE 40s, 50s, AND 60s.

The best characterization of the era of alliance which began in the 1940's and extended through 1950's and 1960's, is that cooperation between Blacks and Jews was marked by a commonality of interests in ending legal and institutional barriers to success. "It was an alliance based on the desirability for both group of getting laws passed that would ban discrimination on grounds of race and religion" (Glazer 105). It is important to note Kaufman's cautionary words,

It is inevitable in a book like this that one writes about 'blacks' and 'Jews' as if each were a homogeneous group. They are not. The cooperation between blacks and Jews was, more often than not, cooperation between some elite blacks and some elite Jews. But what those elites did resonated strongly in each community, and when they fell out that resonated strongly too. (Kaufman, Jonathan 11)

Over these three decades, Jews were enormously over-represented in black organizations and blacks maintained a strong cultural identification with Jews. The alliance and cooperation of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, which would later create the mechanisms for its own destruction.

HIGH PREVALENCE OF JEWISH INVOLVEMENT IN CIVIL RIGHTS

During these three decades of cooperation, Jews and blacks were close allies in the civil rights movement. Blacks spiritual and cultural identification with Jews was not a phenomena unique to this time period, but during that era it blossomed. It is important not to overstate or glorify this era of cooperation, yet blacks identified with the biblical stories of Jewish oppression, and with the success of Jews in America in the face of anti-Semitism. For many black leaders the Jewish experience in America was a model. More importantly, Jews played an integral role in the leadership of many civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and CORE. Kivie Kaplan served as president of the NAACP and was one of Dr. King's principle fund-raisers. Stanley Levinson was Dr. King's principle advisor. Marvin Rich was a chief fund-raiser and speech writer for James Farmer. Jack Greenberg headed the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Over half of the white lawyers who served Civil Rights demonstrators in the

South were Jewish. More than half of the freedom riders were Jews. Almost two-thirds of the whites who went into the South during the Freedom Summer Campaign of 1964 were Jewish, including Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner who, along with fellow black freedom-rider James Chaney were murdered by racist thugs (Ginsburg 146). In addition Jewish organizations, intellectu-

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als, and journals such as Commentary, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress spoke out vehemently while providing financial, organizational, and intellectual support for civil rights.

Benjamin Ginsburg states,

"In the civil rights struggle, Jewish morality and interests pointed in the same direction. Morality dictated that Jews support the efforts of African Americans to free themselves from an apartheid system. To a generation of liberal Jews this was a supreme moral imperative. At the same time, however, many Jews and Jewish organizations, in particular, also recognized that they had an interest in supporting the civil rights movement" (Ginsburg 146).

A society which banned discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or ethnicity, served the interest of Jews as much or more than it did the that of blacks. In the absence of legal discriminatory processes, Jews were confident that they had the education and ability to rise to the highest reaches of the American economic and social ladder. Jews were aligned with the liberal, New Deal wing of the Democratic party, and the civil rights movement went for in destroying the Southern conservative wing of the party, which attacked blacks, and was in direct violation of Jewish political interests and affiliations. Thus, soon the question would become, what had the alliance

done for blacks?

BLACKS AND JEWS FOUGHT DISCRIMINATION TOGETHER, BUT IN VASTLY DIFFERENT CONTEXTS.

In the 1940s, 50s, and to an extent 60s, the established leaders of the black and Jewish communities still agreed that they shared the same agenda. In the 1940s and 50s Jews and blacks fought discrimination together in three areas; education, housing, and employment. The predominant Jewish agency of this era was the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. In 1953 the NJCRAC asserted:

"A fundamental objective of Jewish community relations is equality of opportunity for all, regardless of race, religion, color, or national origin. In a still imperfect democratic society, Jews, together with many other groups suffer from inequalities of opportunity and other forms of discrimination. They are among the victims of the intergroup tensions and antagonisms that exist in our society (Hertzberg 334)."

The NJRAC went on to assert that it was in the interest of Jews to fight side by side with blacks against discrimination in housing, education, and jobs. Yet as Arthur Hertzberg states, "the official words barely masked the differences in real life" (Hertzberg 334).

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Of greatest concern to both groups was discrimination in employment. Yet, different discrimination concerned each group. Jews, with large percentages of children in Universities, and then involved in a major push into the professions, were concerned with discrimination in professional employments like discrimination in big law firms or hospitals. For blacks, the major concern was discrimination in unions and skilled labor. As Hertzberg states, "Jews were still troubled by discrimination at the very top of American economy, in 'executive suites.' Blacks were fighting to leave the most menial jobs in America" (Hertzberg 334).

After employment discrimination, Jews and blacks were most concerned with discrimination in education. However, there were differences in focus once again. Jews were worried about entrance into medical schools and Ivy League

schools and good four year institutions. Blacks were concerned with discrimination and the quality of the elementary and secondary education which their children were receiving. Thus, blacks focused on matters which would improve this education. In the middle 1950s and until the 1960s the principal aim of Blacks fighting for equality in education was to improve or to desegregate the elementary and secondary schools which blacks attended. There was some emphasis on entry into colleges, but the numbers of blacks applying at this time was minuscule.

In the arena of housing, Jews were the words of Arthur Hertzberg, "a battle in suburbia" (Hertzberg 335). Jews in America were already strongly represented in the middle class; the issue of discrimination arose as Jews attempted

to move into posh upper-middle class neighborhoods, or into exclusive city apartments against "restrictive covenants" (Hertzberg 335) which directed owners not to sell to Jews or other unwanted minorities. Yet the Jews, unlike the Blacks were not out in the streets without the possibility of even buying livable housing. Blacks faced a far more desperate situation. They were trapped in wretched slums, with huge tracts of working and middle class housing closed to them. The mass drive of blacks to leave the ghettos and slums owed itself to a sheer lack of space (Glazer 107).

Thus although blacks and Jews clearly fought together, they were fighting on opposite sides of the economic spectrum.

The collective history of blacks and Jews has been fraught with unattainable expectations, misunderstanding, disappointment, and disillusionment. The rift which breached that coalition is important to understand. Its destruction says something about the future of alliances and coalitions in our nation, which is why, understanding the past and present, we must ask what the possibilities for the future are.

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in a Catch-22. The black elite realizes the importance of the coalition it maintains with Jews. It is the very coalition which keeps them in power and in office. Yet, simultaneously this elite realizes that their relationship with Jewish organizations and leadership alienates them from the masses of the black community, and makes them more vulnerable to the attacks of the demagogues. The black and Jewish establishments conceive that both groups are dependent upon one another in the framework of the liberal coalition. The result would be the complete destruction of the Democratic party

and a serious reduction of the influence which both groups presently exercise. In reality, neither blacks nor Jews could feasibly sever their ties to the liberal Democratic coalition. Yet, neither do I believe that there is a realistic chance for Jews and blacks to reaffirm the optimism and cooperation of the early coalition. Today that era seems another time and another place. The tragedy of the current circumstances is that the situation can not get better without, in some way, getting worse. In many ways the current relationship between blacks and Jews is one of paralysis, both groups afraid of the dramatic consequences of a real gesture or real action. Jews and blacks are tied to one another in a fatal embrace. 11

G R A P H Y

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H E L V I D I U S

G O P

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includes, not only Clinton, but also all of Washington, would likely place itself squarely behind the Religious Right candidate.

Whatever does happen, the Republican Party will find itself in an very unfamiliar situation. For twenty years, it has felt little need to worry about sources of division and discord. Even the past two years have seen an amazing display of legislative unity among Republicans. But bubbling underneath the surface of Republican politics is an ideological debate with potentially fatal proportions. A formidable army of crusaders are launching an offensive on the Party's centrist core, and for a party which rarely fails to condemn cowardice in the face of special interests, very few seem to be willing to stand in its way. In the interests of building some sort of electoral

majority, something must be done. But centrists have not done it, and ironically, it is the ideologues which have emerged as the most realistic and the most pragmatic. Conservative Christians have

held the initiative for quite a while, and there exist very few signs that they will be forced to give up much of anything in the near future. The future of the Republican Party is in their hands. 11

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