

## Blacks and Jews: The Strained Alliance

By PETER I. ROSE

**ABSTRACT:** Martin Luther King once stated that "It would be impossible to record the contribution that Jewish people have made toward the Negro's struggle for freedom, it has been so great." For years there was a good deal of public discussion of the commitment of Jews to the relief of black suffering and of black appreciation for it. Recently much has been written about the asymmetrical character of the relationship and about the once-masked, now-open evidence of black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism in certain quarters of both communities, some of them quite strategic. The fact is that Black-Jewish relations have always had a paradoxical quality: Blacks and Jews have been strangers to one another, more than popular liberal sentiment would suggest; neighbors, who, at least in the North, have lived and worked in close proximity if not equality; allies in the struggle for civil rights; and opponents, especially on issues as diverse as affirmative action and American policy in the Middle East. This article examines some of the paradoxes in "the strained alliance."

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THE FIRST Blacks arrived in the American colonies in 1609; the first Jews in 1654. The former were indentured servants, the latter, merchants and professionals. The relative status of those early representatives was, in a sense, prophetic, for regardless of how far some Blacks were to move up the ladder of social mobility in the centuries ahead, Jews generally would be on a higher rung.

Even the Jewish immigrants who arrived between 1880 and 1920, impoverished refugees from Czarist pogroms and general economic blight, were still better off than the black Americans who had been here for more than two centuries. While these new Americans had come from traditional societies where the serfs had only recently been emancipated, they had never been in peonage. Their marginal status, whatever its negative consequences—and there were many—meant that they had learned to care for themselves while having to cope with the others around them. They had survived in part by playing the classic role of the “middleman minority.”<sup>1</sup> That was to carry over into this country.

Many of the Jewish immigrants began their new lives as peddlers

1. Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” *Am. Soc. Review*, 38:583–94 (Oct. 1973); see also Walter P. Zenner, “American Jews in the Light of Middleman Minority Theory,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 5:11–30 (spring/summer 1980).

NOTE: Recently much has been written about black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism. A listing additional to other footnotes in this article includes: Max Geltman, *The Confrontation: Black Power, Anti-Semitism and the Myth of Integration* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Ronald T. Tsakushima, *The Social and Psychological Correlations of Black Anti-Semitism* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1978); and Robert Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter* (Westport, CT: Negro University Press, 1970).

and tradesmen or in the needle trades, struggling to survive and to give their families a new lease on life. Despite a variety of obstacles, not least anti-Jewish prejudices and restrictive practices, they worked hard to prove themselves—and to improve themselves. By the 1940s, the dramatic mobility of the Jewish segment was beginning to be noticed. Within another decade the Jews were to be rated as the most successful of all ethnic groups in the United States on a variety of measures, including financial attainment, academic achievement, and professional status.<sup>2</sup>

Black Americans had a very different history.<sup>3</sup> They did not choose to come, and their entire existence was shaped by the reason that they did. The mark of their oppression left a bitter legacy.

Slavery was replaced by segregation, and still Blacks remained beyond the pale of social acceptance, far down in the stratification hierarchy and outside the mainstream of American political life. Yet owing to the nature of their particular acculturation experiences, they were to internalize many basic American values regarding achievement and mobility. What most Blacks came to want was not very different from what Jews sought, namely, a legitimate place in American society. But coming out of different social worlds, they saw themselves and others—and each other—through very different lenses.

Until fairly recently, most Jews

2. See, for example, Alice Kessler-Harris and Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, “European Immigrant Groups,” in *American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Thomas Sowell (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1978), pp. 107–37.

3. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), p. 482.

thought Blacks were seeking acceptance via the route of assimilation. Many black leaders gave credence to such assumptions, arguing that the idea that others should regard them as being different was tantamount to racism. To white supporters the key word was "integration."<sup>4</sup> To a marked degree it was used to mean that Blacks should be helped to overcome those traits that signified their "cultural deprivation." They should try to become like everyone else.

Jews had long maintained that what they wanted for themselves was the right to be different, to enjoy the pluralistic promise of America. Horace Kallen's metaphor of this society as a symphony orchestra in which each section has its own timbre and tonality was much more to their liking than any ideas of "white washed" Anglo conformity.<sup>5</sup>

It is ironic that during the early 1960s when numbers of young Jews began to eschew their hyphenated identity, in what some called a process of deracination, Blacks began to undergo a sort of ethnogenesis. Much of the new assertion of racial pride was in response to the realization that to truly accept Blacks, white America would have to become "color-blind." As the civil rights leader James Farmer put it, Blacks realized that

[America] would become color-blind only when we gave up our color. The white man, who presumably was no color, would have to give up only his prejudices. We would have to give up

our identities. Thus, we would usher in the Great Day with an act of complete self-denial and self-abasement.<sup>6</sup>

This recognition led to the charting of a different course.

Many liberal Jews were among those most alarmed by the increasingly strident assertions of militant Blacks in their ethnosyncratic quest for identity. They seemed unable to understand that what the new black leaders were after was what Jews already possessed: a chauvinistic sense of their own collective worth, a pride in the uniqueness of their past. Perhaps part of the problem was that, for all their concerns, American Jews knew very little about Blacks.

To most Jews of German and Eastern European background, black people were a mystery. They knew little about Africa or its cultures, or about the American South.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, Jews had long been an integral part of Afro-American *Weltanschauung*—not America's Jews or Europe's, but the Biblical Jews who followed Moses out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. The widely held sense of affinity with the children of Israel was part of the socialization process Blacks were exposed to in the Protestant parishes of the American South. The evidence of the linkage is abundant, but nowhere is it clearer than in the Negro spirituals and in Gospel music. The lyrics reveal a litany of over-Jordan imagery and of deliverance from bondage.

That so much is derived from the

4. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 68.

5. Horace Kallen, "Democracy vs. the Melting Pot," *The Nation*, 25 Feb. 1915, p. 220; and see Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 88-114.

6. James Farmer, *Freedom—When?* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 87.

7. It should be noted that in Irving Howe's monumental history of New York's Jews there are but few references to the immigrants' images of or contact with Blacks. See Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

fifth book of the Pentateuch is not to say that Blacks have been unaware of the portrayal of Jews in the New Testament, nor that as listeners to evangelical circuit riders or radio crusaders they could have avoided hearing about "the perfidious Jews," "the Christ-killers." Still, most Blacks know that like Moses, Jesus was a Jew, and they have difficulty reconciling the wholesale dismissal of his parentage because of the acts of a small group of betrayers. While it has been argued that "if blacks are anti-Semitic, it is because they are Christian," most evidence belies such a claim.<sup>8</sup>

One must look elsewhere for the principal roots of whatever black anti-Semitism exists. One place is the economic nexus where Blacks and Jews have often found themselves in an interdependent relationship since the early decades of this century.

#### THE OLD GHETTOS AND THE NEW

The years 1910 and 1920 bracketed a new phenomenon in American social history: the steadily accelerating northward migration of Blacks. Prior to that period, over 90 percent of black Americans lived south of the Mason-Dixon line. But in that decade alone Detroit experienced an increase in the black population of 600 percent; Cleveland, 300 percent; Chicago, 150 percent; and the black populations of Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New

York doubled.<sup>9</sup> That rapid influx was to change profoundly the pattern of intergroup relations in the country.

Not only did old Americans find themselves confronted with a new reality, new Americans, including Jews, did too. Many Jews learned of Black suffering through the Yiddish press, which began to draw comparisons between their own experiences—as slaves in Egypt, as ghettoized pariahs in the Middle Ages, and as victims of the Spanish Inquisition and of Czarist pogroms—and the painful history of Afro-Americans. The diatribes of Populists, the rampages of Klansmen, the frightening spectacle of race riots in the Midwest, and the growing nativist sentiment that was at once antiforeign, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black served to further make Jews aware of the extent to which prejudice abounded in their new Promised Land. Yet while Jews became alerted to the discriminatory treatment of southern Blacks and began supporting causes to redress their grievances, many northern Blacks felt that they—the Jews—were part of the problem.

For many years, those Jews with whom most northern Blacks had direct contact were not only a step or more ahead of them—as foremen in garment factories, teachers in public schools, or social workers—but were also apt to be those Whites on whom they had to depend for many goods and services and for housing. The old-law tenements and brownstone apartment buildings into which migrating Blacks moved were often owned by Jews.

8. Philip S. Foner once suggested that to some black leaders, the problem was not that Jews were Jewish but "that they had failed to live up to their own principles as exemplified by Moses and the Prophets." See Philip S. Foner, "Black-Jewish Relations in the Opening Years of the Twentieth Century," *Phylon*, winter 1975, 359-67.

9. Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 15.

When we were growing up in Harlem our demoralizing series of landlords were Jewish, and we hated them. . . .

The grocer was a Jew, and being in debt to him was very much like being in debt to the company store. . . . We bought our clothes from a Jew and, sometimes, our secondhand shoes, and the pawnbroker was a Jew—perhaps we hated him most of all.<sup>10</sup>

James Baldwin, who wrote those bitter words, has argued that, unlike those he knew personally (good Jews?), those who were so distrusted epitomized for Blacks the evil agents of repressive white society.<sup>11</sup> Still, he and others acknowledged that Blacks did distinguish between “white oppressors” and Jewish ones, between Mr. Charlie and Mr. Goldberg. It was said that if Jews exploited you, they could also be exploited—or at least appealed to for assistance. They were middlemen in more ways than one.

Black folklore has long been filled with jokes and parables that begin, “Once a white man, a Jew, and a Negro . . .”<sup>12</sup> In those stories the leitmotiv is that the white man has the real power, he runs the plantation and the society, but on the street it is the Jew who is the clever con- niver, always taking advantage of the poor folk who are but innocent victims of the overall system of oppression.<sup>13</sup>

In many ways, the symbiotic re-

lationship of urban Jews to the rural Blacks in their neighborhoods may be described as a kind of “Russian Redux” with Blacks playing the role of *muzhiks* (Russian peasants) and Jews playing themselves. Milton Himmelfarb once set up the parallel. He explained that in the Old Country, the “muzhik was the Jew’s external environment and, more often than not, his livelihood.”<sup>14</sup>

Substitute the words “urban America” for “the Old Country” and “Blacks” for “muzhiks,” and Himmelfarb’s description gives a fair reflection of how many American Jews felt about Blacks.

. . . The Jews of the Pale of Settlement thought themselves superior to the muzhiks, feared them, felt guilty about them, pitied them, envied them, and, while distrusting them, wanted to see their lot bettered.

The Jews did not hate the muzhiks. In general, we are poor haters—partly, I suppose, because we have had so many enemies that hatred is pointless.<sup>15</sup>

Fear, guilt, pity, envy, distrust.

Numerous Jews, poor and working class, spent their own lives struggling to get out and keep out of poverty, to survive in the urban jungle, to make something of themselves, and to provide their children with a way out. Many made it, but some were left behind.<sup>16</sup> They saw their friends leave, their synagogues close down, and their neighbor-

10. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 125.

11. James Baldwin, “Negroes are Antisemitic Because They’re Antiwhite,” in *Antisemitism in America*, ed. Leonard Dinnerstein (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 125–31.

12. C. Eric Lincoln, comment in *Negro and Jew*, ed. Shlomo Katz (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 90.

13. See Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 306.

14. Milton Himmelfarb, “Jew, Negroes and Muzhiks,” *Commentary*, Oct. 1966, pp. 83–86.

15. *Ibid.* For a personal account reflecting the tensions discussed by Himmelfarb, see Norman Podhoretz, “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” *Commentary*, Feb. 1963, pp. 93–101.

16. See Ralph Levine, “Left Behind in Brooklyn,” in *Nation of Nations*, ed. Peter I. Rose (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 335–46.

hoods undergo profound changes. They were troubled at the seeming lack of communal concerns on the part of many who moved in. When they tried to understand when others, including their educated and liberal children, explained that rising crime rates and deteriorating conditions were the legacy of segregation, neglect, and anomie, they would often counter by saying that after all they, too, knew what it meant to be poor, and they had never acted in such a manner. But most of all, they resented it when they, who had nothing to do with slavery or segregation, were told they had to pay for the sins of other people's fathers.<sup>17</sup>

The accusations of Jewish exploitation, which were to grow even more vituperative in the years ahead, often overshadowed the fact that many upwardly mobile, blue-collar and middle-class Blacks—in the North and in the South—saw Jews rather differently than did those who remained in the underclass of society with little chance of escaping. They, too, knew the folklore. They knew the stereotypes. They knew the shopkeepers. They knew that "Jews are sharp," "Jews are smart," "Jews work hard to get ahead," and "Jews always help their own." But instead of saying, "That's the trouble with them," the Jews were often seen as models, exemplars of success, as allies in the struggle, even benefactors.

As the late Dr. King once suggested:

Jews progressed because they possessed a tradition of education combined with social and political action. The

Jewish family enthroned education and sacrificed to get it. The result was far more than abstract learning. Uniting social action with educational competence, Jews became enormously effective in political life. Those Jews who became lawyers, businessmen, writers, entertainers, union leaders and medical men did not vanish into the pursuits of their trade exclusively. They lived an active life in political circles, learning the techniques and arts of politics.

Nor was it only the rich who were involved in social and political action. Millions of Jews for half a century remained relatively poor, but they were far from passive in social and political areas. . . . Their life raft in the sea of discouragement was social action.<sup>18</sup>

#### WHOSE BROTHERS' KEEPER?

King was quite right. Jews had long been involved in social action, not least in the cause of civil rights. Not only did wealthy philanthropists like Jacob Shiff, Felix Warburg, Louis Marshall, and Julius Rosenwald feel a deep commitment to assuring the rights of all Americans and to giving time, energy, and considerable amounts of money to the cause, but thousands of less affluent Jews contributed as well. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League were two of the most prominent black-oriented civil rights and social service organizations to which Jews gave considerable financial support and in which Jews worked closely with Blacks.<sup>19</sup> In addition, many

18. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 154–55.

19. See B. Joyce Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP* (New York: Atheneum, 1972); Nancy Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), esp. pp. 53–54; and

17. See Peter I. Rose and Stanley Rothman, "Race and Education in New York," *Race*, 6: 108–16 (Oct. 1964); see also, Murray Friedman, ed., *Overcoming Middle-Class Rage* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).

Jewish defense agencies, such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee, were engaged in attempts to reduce intergroup tension and to educate Americans as to the multiethnic character of the country.

From 1910 to the early 1960s, the principal thrust of black activists and their Jewish allies was to challenge this society to honor its own vaunted ideals. This often meant taking the case to court, if need be, all the way to the Supreme Court.

One of the most significant of the groups working toward constitutional justice was the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which prepared briefs, planned the strategy, and pleaded cases that eventually were to overturn the famous *Plessy* ruling that had declared the legality of segregation. The staff included Blacks, such as Thurgood Marshall, and also a number of Jews; in fact, its director was a Jewish lawyer, Jack Greenberg. Together they and their colleagues won a number of crucial cases in the struggle for justice, culminating in the *Brown* decision of 1954 in which the Supreme Court unanimously struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine.

The coalition of black, Jewish, and other white liberal integrationists held sway for over 50 years. Even the Congress of Racial Equality and the Southern Christian Leadership Congress, two organizations that had far fewer Jews in positions of leadership, or as "angels," or staff members, still relied heavily on the support of Jewish activists. And during the periods of the most intensive

campaigns in the southern United States, the late 1950s and early 1960s, reports from the field cited over and over the disproportionate representation of Jews.<sup>20</sup>

Jews were numbered among the freedom riders, the voter registration teams, and those who demonstrated in Washington, Chicago, Birmingham, Selma, and throughout Mississippi. Jews were also prominent on the stage and behind the scenes in the last great display of integrated élan: the 1963 march on Washington. Two hundred fifty thousand black and white Americans gathered on the Mall to hear Martin Luther King say,

When we let freedom ring, . . . we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last!"<sup>21</sup>

A Harris poll of 1157 randomly selected black men and women was conducted in 1963. Upon examination of the data, Celia Heller and Alphonso Pinkney noted that "in general, the opinion of Negroes on the stand of Jews [regarding civil rights] is more favorable than unfavorable."<sup>22</sup> Jews were more apt to be seen as "helpful"—42 percent—than as "harmful"—9 percent—to the cause. However, a significant caveat was noted with regard to the helpful-harmful question: almost half

20. See August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

21. Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream," *SCLC Newsletter*, 12:8 (Sept. 1963).

22. Celia Stopnicka Heller and Alphonso Pinkney, "The Attitudes of Negroes Toward Jews," *Social Forces*, 43:364-69 (March 1965).

—49 percent—of the respondents answered that they were “not sure.” Heller and Pinkney suggest that this may not have been an artifact of the question’s being improperly or ambiguously phrased or of the respondents’ intentional evasion<sup>23</sup> (a similar “problem” had appeared on other nationwide polls).<sup>24</sup> It was perhaps more likely that many Blacks were confused about their own feelings and uncertain as to how they wanted to express this confusion.

In a 1964 study, Gary Marx sought to explore the character of black anti-Semitism. His analysis was based on interviews conducted with 492 black adults living in a variety of metropolitan areas outside the South and with 527 others who lived in one of four selected cities, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, and Birmingham.<sup>25</sup> According to answers to stereotype-laden questions, Marx found that the extent of anti-Semitism differed considerably by region. High scorers—those most anti-Semitic—were more common among those living outside the South. In each of the non-southern subsamples, “roughly three in ten appeared as anti-Semitic, that is, gave an anti-Semitic response to five or more of the nine items compared to less than one in five in the South.”<sup>26</sup>

To test the assumption that anti-Semitism among black Americans was on the increase in the fall of 1964, the period immediately following a long, hot, and violent summer in many cities, Marx asked respondents: “Thinking of Jews as a

group, would you say you feel more friendly toward them now than you used to, less friendly, or have you always felt as you do now?” He reported that most said they felt the same. And among that minority who said their attitudes had changed, most indicated that they were more positive than before. Here regional differences were slight.<sup>27</sup>

Marx’s findings agreed in large measure with those of Harris, who found that “a large proportion of Negroes perceive Jews as helpful to the cause of Negro rights.”<sup>28</sup> But such findings did not rule out the existence of pockets of anti-Jewish feeling in certain sectors of the black community.

. . . This is especially true of the Negro city slums, such as New York’s Harlem and Chicago’s Bronzeville, where the tradesmen, rent collectors, and real estate agents tend to be Jews. (As is pointed out in *Black Metropolis*, in New Orleans, where Italian merchants predominated in the Negro slums, Italians were the targets of hate.) . . . And some writers claim that certain black nationalist groups are ready to arouse these antagonisms.<sup>29</sup>

This last statement by Heller and Pinkney proved to be most prescient. Things began to change as race relations entered a new phase when, as I have written elsewhere, the “soulless militancy” of the black integrationists and the “ethnocentric blackwardness” of the nationalists were finally joined into a potent movement for black consciousness,

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 366–67.

24. See, for example, “The Nationwide Poll of March, 1959” (New York: Division of Scientific Research, American Jewish Committee, 1959).

25. Gary T. Marx, *Protest and Prejudice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 133–34.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

28. Heller and Pinkney, p. 369.

29. *Ibid.* See Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York: Signet Books, 1963). For a review of studies of black and white anti-Semitism, see Harold E. Quinley and Charles Y. Glock, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Free Press, 1979), esp. pp. 54–72.



black pride, and "Black Power."<sup>30</sup> Among the first to feel the results of the change in outlook and orientation were Jewish members of the various organizations and other Jewish activists. But many other Jews felt it, too.

### BREAKING RANKS

In 1966, Allon Schoener had organized a highly successful exhibition, "Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925," at the Jewish Museum in New York.<sup>31</sup> In 1968, he was invited to set up a comparable exhibition on black life at the Metropolitan Museum of New York. "Harlem on My Mind" was equally striking, but it was far from successful. From the start many Blacks were incensed that Schoener, a white man, was given the responsibility for the show. Many Jews were to become infuriated over the text of the introduction to the catalogue, for it was based upon a theme written by a 16-year-old black student.<sup>32</sup> Among other things, it included the following Baldwinian reprieve: "Anti-Jewish feeling is a natural result of the Black northern migration."<sup>33</sup>

In point of fact, many passages in the essay were "borrowed," but not from James Baldwin. They were paraphrases from a book considered

at the time to be one of the most definitive assessments of New York City's ethnic groups, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan.<sup>34</sup> Even knowledge of the source did not assuage Jewish anger, especially when the paragraph quoted also included the sentence, "One other important factor worth noting is that, psychologically Blacks may find that anti-Jewish sentiments place them, for once, within a majority."<sup>35</sup>

The chasm was widening. The rhetoric was sounding increasingly ominous. The polarization was occurring against a backdrop of rapid changes on both the national and international scene. At home it was the Black Power revolt, the growing resentment against the war in Vietnam, and the various counterculture movements that were causing profound alterations in social and political relations. Abroad there were many matters of significance, not least the Six-Day War in Israel. What was predicted in those turbulent days seemed to begin to become true. In 1968 I wrote that

American Jews, delighted at Israeli victory in the Six Day War, have evinced much less enthusiasm for their own country's protracted conflict in Southeast Asia and its stalemated war against poverty at home. Other groups in American life share the sense of frustration. In the search for scapegoats that may soon ensue, Jews may find themselves most vulnerable to attack from right, left, and below. By seeking reform and compromise on most issues instead of radical change, they may come increasingly to appear too white for the black militants, too red for the white con-

30. Peter I. Rose, *They and We*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 162.

31. Allon Schoener, ed., *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

32. Candice van Ellison, "Introduction," *Harlem on My Mind*, ed. Allon Schoener (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 2. For a further discussion of the controversy, see Lenore E. Berson, *The Negroes and the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1971), esp. the Epilogue, "Pictures at an Exhibition," pp. 418-36.

33. van Ellison.

34. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge: M.I.T. and Harvard, 1963), pp. 71-73.

35. van Ellison.

servatives, and too yellow for their own children.<sup>36</sup>

Many Blacks did begin to see Jews as too white; many Whites did begin to see them—again—as too red; and for a time, many of their own children saw them as too yellow—or soft. The adult Jews themselves, motivated perhaps by prideful identity with the Davids of Israel who slew the Arab Goliath, began to reassert their sense of Jewishness. But almost as soon as the resurgence of Jewish ethnicity began to take place, the New York school strike occurred.

. . . The “liberal” establishment of the city—including the Jewish organizations—had supported an experiment in community control of Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district. Most of the teachers in that school district, like most of the teachers in the rest of the city school system, were Jewish. Most of the community was black. In the fall of 1968, the new community school board fired thirteen teachers, all of them Jews.<sup>37</sup>

Things reached a flash point when members of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) were confronted by local groups and many outsiders who opposed the “Jewish hegemony” over the educational establishment.<sup>38</sup> While there were a number of Jews who publicly argued against what they called “The Myth of Black Anti-Semitism,”<sup>39</sup> many others were convinced that they were being used as

scapegoats in a larger struggle. Their fear—some called it paranoia—was fed by the anti-Semitic antilocutions of angry Blacks, expressed over the public airwaves. Statements such as “Hitler didn’t make enough lampshades,” uttered by 15-year-old Tyrone Wood on Julius Lester’s weekly WBAI radio show, typified the sort of diatribe that fed the Jewish backlash.<sup>40</sup>

Lester, whose own views have undergone a profound change in recent years,<sup>41</sup> sought to explain the position of Blacks who were so outraged by the reluctance of the UFT and other bodies to support their demands for control.

. . . When blacks consistently attacked the political position of the UFT, their response was to accuse blacks of being anti-Semitic and to point to their liberal record on race relations and the fact that Shanker [the Jewish head of the UFT] marched in Selma. Indeed, Jews tend to be a little self-righteous about their liberal record, always jumping to point out that they have been in the forefront of the fight for racial equality. Yes, they have played a prominent role and blacks always thought it was because they believed in certain principles. When they remind us continually of this role, then we realize that they were pitying us and wanted our gratitude, not the realization of the principles of justice and humanity.

Maybe that’s where the problem comes now. Jews consider themselves liberals. Blacks consider them paternalistic.<sup>42</sup>

36. Peter I. Rose, “The Ghetto and Beyond” in *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America*, ed. Peter I. Rose (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 17.

37. Stephen D. Isaacs, *Jews and American Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 164–65.

38. Herbert J. Gans, “Negro-Jewish Conflict in New York City: A Sociological Evaluation,” *Midstream*, March 1969, pp. 3–15.

39. A full page advertisement titled “How New York’s Jews Were Turned Against Black Men” appeared in the *New York Times*,

16 March 1969, p. 7E. It was “Reprinted as a public service by the Jewish Citizens’ Committee for Community Control.”

40. For a discussion of the episode, see Julius Lester, “A Response,” in *Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism*, ed. Nat Hentoff, (New York: Richard W. Baron, 1970), p. 229.

41. See Julius Lester, “Affirmations: All God’s Children,” *Moment*, 5:11–14, 26 (April 1980).

42. Lester, pp. 231–32.

The same sentiments began to be voiced in local meetings of the national organizations. They were deeply felt and reacted to. Many Jews pulled back. Many pulled out. Once gone, they left the civil rights houses divided over the issue of any white involvement whatsoever.<sup>43</sup>

Those militant groups that survived bent their energies and turned their depleted financial resources to ghetto reconstruction, community organization, and the furtherance of strong black cultural identity. They also gave their approval to struggles already taking place on the college campuses and, to a lesser extent, in the boardrooms—the latter being left to such groups as the still-integrated National Urban League.

The campus revolts of the 1960s involved many issues, but there were two prominent factions, one white, often dominated by Jewish radicals,<sup>44</sup> one black. The whole scenario was played out almost as if iconoclast Paul Goodman had written the script. As in his *Growing Up Absurd*, there were the frustrated, upper-middle-class white rebels inside the closed room looking for ways to break out; and there were the frustrated black militants outside the closed room trying to find ways to get in.<sup>45</sup> Even at the height of the revolt, most black students when asked, "What do you want?" would reply, "What you've got."

The Blacks' campus campaigns were quite successful. Blacks made

demands: more black students. They received commitments to do more recruiting. They wanted black studies. Faculties, even those opposed in principle, gave in, and new courses and programs proliferated. They said they needed black cultural centers. They got them.<sup>46</sup> Soon it was not enough to offer greater opportunities; places had to be guaranteed. The signal words were "open enrollment" and "affirmative action." Their implementation was to further exacerbate the growing strains between the Jews and the Blacks.

Open enrollment meant, essentially, altering, lowering, or removing traditional standards for admission to institutions of higher public education. In New York, the city with the largest Jewish population and one that had long prided itself on the excellence provided in the several branches of the City University of New York, it meant a substantial change, not only in the composition of student bodies, but also in the character of education itself. A great debate raged over the issue, with faculties—many of whose members were Jewish—deeply divided. As in other struggles over what some defined as elitism and others as simply maintaining standards, older faculty members and those in the hard sciences tended to be the most conservative; the younger ones, especially in the social sciences, the most liberal. In the end, the open enrollment policies prevailed, and many "minority students"—the label that came to be used for Blacks and other non-Whites—entered the colleges with minimal qualifications. The record of their achievement was a mixed

43. Berson, pp. 138–45. See also Murray Friedman, "The Jews," in *Through Different Eyes*, eds. Peter I. Rose et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), esp. pp. 154–61.

44. See Stanley Rothman and Robert Lichter, *Radical Christians, Radical Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

45. Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* (New York: Random House, 1960).

46. See Ben Halpern, *Jews and Blacks* (New York: Heider and Heider, 1971), pp. 18–25.

one. Opponents, even those willing to concede minor successes, saw the program as an unmitigated disaster for higher education. They felt the city colleges were no longer a place of learning and research, but holding pens for unqualified job seekers.

In other cities open enrollment was put into practice, but because their municipal institutions had played different historic roles and had far fewer Jewish students and staff members, the issue seemed somewhat less contentious. Affirmative action was another story.<sup>47</sup>

For Blacks, affirmative action means getting a bigger slice of the pie, a slice more closely proportionate to their percentage in the overall population. For most Jews, who represent a fraction of the general population and who remember not only the Nuremberg laws but the *numerous clausus* used to restrict their numbers in American universities, it means a return to quotas. Statistically overrepresented in the professions and in academia, positions attained by acceptance of meritocratic principles and by hard work often in the face of discriminatory practices, many Jews feared that the supplanting of such individualistic ideas by "group rights" and class actions would harm them more than others.<sup>48</sup>

In the celebrated legal cases of DeFunis and Bakke, both challenging admission policies that favored minorities in what some called "reverse discrimination," several Jewish

organizations entered pleas, *amicus curiae*.<sup>49</sup> To many Blacks this was further evidence of the softness of the Jewish commitment to black advancement; to some it was a clear indication of Jewish duplicity. For such critics, the Jews' pleas that fairness dictated an absolutely open competition was disingenuous. "They of all people should know what it is to be discriminated against."

To which "they" replied:

Precisely. Such selective treatment merely plays into the hands of those who would see you (or us) in categorical terms and not as individuals, who will say that the only way you can make it is with special assistance which, ironically, gives credence to the view that you are in fact unable to compete in an open arena.<sup>50</sup>

That debate continues. So, too, does one over the most divisive issue of all, the conflict over support for Israel by Jews and, increasingly, for the Arabs' cause by Blacks.

### CHOOSING SIDES

In many ways, this last source of conflict is different from all others. Every issue on which Blacks and Jews disagreed in the past was based on what I referred to earlier as the asymmetrical relationship. For historic reasons, American Jews generally have been in positions of greater control than American Blacks whether as employers, teachers, merchants, landlords, organizers, donors, or academic achievers. But when some prominent Blacks began attacking Israel and offering support for the

47. See, for example, Leo Pfeffer, "Quotas, Compensation and Open Enrollment," in *The Politics of Confrontation*, ed. Samuel Hendel (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971).

48. Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); see also Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The New Radicalism," *Atlantic*, Aug. 1968, p. 39.

49. See Allan P. Sindler, *Bakke, DeFunis and Minority Admissions: The Quest for Equal Opportunity* (New York: Longman, 1978).

50. See Bertram H. Gold, "The Bakke Decision," *Civil Rights Digest*, Aug. 1968.

PLO, Jews were hit with a chilling reality that, whatever their motives, some Blacks had seized upon the one issue that could be most damaging to Jewish security.

It was feared that Blacks—including those who maintained their ties and, perhaps, their dependence through thick and thin—were willing to trade traditional Jewish support and patronage for the more powerful economic weapons of their new-found allies, the Arabs, and in doing so, played into the hands of those who, once again, had that old scapegoat, the Jew, to blame. As Candice van Ellison put it, "Our contempt for Jews makes us feel more completely American in sharing a national prejudice."<sup>51</sup> She was writing in another time about another aspect of the problem, but to Jews the words had and have a frightening ring.

It is for these reasons that so many Jews reacted as they did to the incidents of the summer of 1978 when ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, admitted to having made unauthorized contact with a PLO representative. Nothing seemed destined to raise Jewish ire more than the specter of a sellout of Israel, regardless of how divided they were themselves over Israeli policies, especially with regard to Palestinians. Nothing hurt more than that among the principal movers for a changed policy were members—often viewed as representatives—of the black community.

The matter of black support for the Arab cause generated a dialogue not only among Jews, but within the black community as well. Until recently, most black leaders supported Israel while the nationalists and separatists opposed the state and its

policies. For a time, that seemed to be changing. It was infuriating to Jews when they asked, "Why can't you understand *our* vulnerability? Why can't you understand how much we fear that the Arabs will carry out their threat to destroy Israel in another Holocaust?" and were told, "We're tired of hearing of your suffering."<sup>52</sup> It was shocking when such views were expressed by former civil rights leaders who marched with Martin Luther King and were endorsed by men such as Jesse Jackson, Wyatt Tee Walker, and Joseph Lowry, now head of the Southern Christian Leadership Congress. But as it turned out, there was far less unanimity on the issue in the black community than the Jews and the press were given to believe.

One of the strongest critics and eloquent defenders of Israel—and American Jews—was the black writer Julius Lester, the same Julius Lester known in the 1960s as one of the most vehement challengers of the Establishment and of the Jews within it.<sup>53</sup> By 1979, he saw things rather differently.

And so, Jews are being used as scapegoats again.

I cannot interpret otherwise the recent positions taken by black leaders on the Mideast and black-Jewish relations. And I am angered by how self-righteous and arrogant black leaders sounded: "Jews must show more sensitivity and be prepared for more consultation before taking positions contrary to the best interests of the black community."

While I understand that such a state-

52. Harold Cruse once claimed that American Blacks had little interest in the suffering of European Jews. What was important, he argued, was that Jews had not suffered in America as Blacks had. See Cruse, p. 482.

53. See Julius Lester, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Momma* (New York: Dial Press, 1968).

51. van Ellison, p. 2.

ment comes from years of anger at active Jewish opposition to affirmative action, and how deeply blacks were hurt by this opposition to what was in our "best interests," black leadership still seems to be ignorant of the fact that Jews have been hurt by black indifference to the fate of Israel. . . .

Because blacks have been silent while Jews continued to be murdered, I am appalled that they dare come forward now to self-righteously lecture Jews to "show more sensitivity" when black leadership is guilty of ethnocentric insensitivity. . . .

I am deeply sorry that black leadership spoke as it did, because my humanity as a black person was diminished. The differences and tensions between blacks and Jews are real, but the positions espoused recently by black leaders were not "our Declaration of Independence," as Kenneth Clark put it. They merely showed that blacks, too, can be Germans.<sup>54</sup>

#### TOWARD RECONCILIATION

A number of black commentators thought Lester had gone way too far. Still, stung by such charges, some began to speak out arguing that, of late, too much had been made of the rifts between the two communities and too little of the continuing bonds—and interdependencies—and that, regardless of the very real divisions over central issues such as affirmative action and Middle East policies, Blacks and Jews in many areas continued to march to the beat of a common drummer. And they were partially correct in this defense.

Recently Joyce Gelb reported that attitudinal surveys taken after Young's resignation reflect a Black constituency which had little apparent sympathy

with Black leaders' statements on Israel, the PLO, and Young. Replies to the Gallup poll indicated general indifference to Middle East politics, a feeling that relations with the Jews had been and could continue to be friendly, and a denial of the view that Jews were responsible for Young's dismissal.<sup>55</sup>

The results of 175 interviews Gelb conducted in 1976 and 1977 and analyses of subsequent studies indicate that those called "Black spokesmen" were not always speaking for the rank and file. Moreover, even while the debate was raging over issues that divided the groups, there were many signs of continuing cooperation on matters of common concern such as fair housing, school integration and the reduction of intergroup tensions. And there continued to be an eagerness to maintain ties between such old allies as the Jewish Defense Agencies, the NAACP, and the National Urban League. Throughout the troubled times these groups continued to work in concert lobbying against federal cuts in social programs and for such matters as continued Medicaid reimbursement for abortions.<sup>56</sup> Such private sector cooperation is more than matched at the congressional level where the formal black caucus works quite closely with the informal Jewish caucus, most often voting the same way on issues of *both* foreign and domestic policy.

In a preface to Gelb's report, Irving M. Levine suggests that

the true facts are that the two communities still play powerful roles as mutual beneficiaries of each other's support. There is also a heartening tendency, among leaders of both com-

54. Julius Lester, *The Village Voice*, 10 Sept. 1979. For another view, see Amiri Baraka, "Confessions of a Former Anti-

55. Joyce Gelb, *Beyond Conflict: Black-Jewish Relations* (New York: Institute in Human Relations of the American Jewish

munities, to move rapidly to stem the worst effects of public controversy.<sup>57</sup>

### HILLEL'S ADMONITIONS

At the present writing there is evidence that attempts are being made to heal the rifts and to reopen the dialogues. Some, such as Arthur Hertzberg, see the attempt to forge an alliance between Blacks and the PLO as "a temporary aberration at a moment of anger,"<sup>58</sup> as punishment for Jewish opposition to affirmative action. Such spokespersons urge both Jews and Blacks to ignore the innuendos of the separatists and the Third World supporters and to get on with the task of reducing interracial conflict in this country. Their words and phrases sound strikingly like those heard just before the Black Power revolt.

The issue is moral. There are concrete, aching, suffering, trapped, enraged human beings out there, in the ghetto and in the barrios, in the hundreds of thousands. They are not intellectuals who know how to use sociological jargon, to argue and confute. They know, on their own bodies and in the marrow of their bones, that a ruling elite structures the system to protect its privileges, and that the elite must be persuaded—or pressured—to move over.<sup>59</sup>

But the radical-sounding phrases

57. Irving M. Levine, "Preface," in *Beyond Conflict*, Gelb, p. v. See also "Black-Jewish Relations," *Data Black Survey Results* (Jan. 1980), pp. 2-4. A poll of 1146 adult Blacks found black Americans more favorable to Jews than other white ethnic groups.

58. Arthur Hertzberg, "Merit, Affirmative Action, Blacks and Jews," *Present Tense*, winter 1980, p. 28.

59. *Ibid.*

are tempered by the standard liberal argument.

Jewish historical experience points to the path in the political spectrum which is occupied by moderate reformers. Their views, and the actions to accompany them, are the true public interest of all America.<sup>60</sup>

Surely they are in the interest of Jews who still believe in the American system and both of its seemingly contradictory credos: strength in diversity through equal protection, and *e pluribus unum*. But they know it because they have made it and must hold their hard-won ground. They succeeded in large measure by standing up for their own beliefs and caring for their own kith and kin. They succeeded because they had internalized not only the promise of the American Dream, but Hillel's admonition, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

Blacks have come to heed the same sentiment. But, unlike America's Jews, they have not yet made it. Some Jews still worry that they will continue to look for assistance wherever they can find it. Others, seeing that once again Blacks and Jews are targets of reactionary forces, know that unless there are serious attempts to reason together and to reforge the old alliances, both groups will be used by those who have little use for either.<sup>61</sup>

Jews know this, too. For Hillel also asked, "If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

60. *Ibid.*

61. See Balfour Brickner, "Am I Still My Brother's Keeper?" *Present Tense*, summer 1979, p. 64; and James Farmer, "On Black-Jewish Tensions," *Open Forum*, 3:4 (Feb. 1980).