

IN SEARCH OF COMMON GROUND

Jews and Other Minorities in the United States

SAUL ROSENTHAL, PH.D.

Regional Director, Anti-Defamation League, Denver, Colorado

The basis of intergroup relations should not be the issues that Jews and other minority groups have in common as Jews or minorities but what they have in common as Americans. The common agenda should be the strengthening of the cornerstones of American democracy and the institutions that implement them.

Recent anti-Semitic speeches by representatives of the Nation of Islam and the subsequent outcry have brought black-Jewish relations in the United States today more clearly into focus. Some who romanticize the relationship the two groups had in the 1960s wonder why the agenda of the past cannot be the agenda of today. Others who lack the experience of that civil rights struggle wonder what relationship blacks and Jews ever had and why people today would think there should even be an ongoing relationship. All are troubled by the perceived conflict between the two communities.

At a national level leaders of both communities search for the common ground on which to address the issues of anti-Semitism among blacks and of racism among whites, as well as to identify issues on which both communities can work. The embrace of the Nation of Islam, along with other marginalized black leaders, by mainstream black leaders has caused the greatest concern, seeming to some Jews to be a rejection of the concerns of the Jewish community about anti-Semitism among blacks generally and the Nation of Islam in particular.

Borrowing a notion introduced by Jonathan Kaufman in his 1988 book about black-Jewish relations, *Broken Alliance*, the relationship between blacks and Jews in the 1960s probably never was as good as some remember nor as bad today as some now claim. What was clear during the 1950s and 1960s is that Jews and blacks needed each other in order to meet needs internal to the two communities. And they also needed each other to make real progress in moving the collective civil rights agenda forward.

Despite the problems in the current relationship, it can still be argued that the two communities need each other, just as Jews need Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, and so on. We need blacks and other minority groups to be in relationship with us simply because they, like us, are minorities. Each community lacks sufficient numbers to effect political, social, or ideological change in this country *alone*.

One argument sometimes put forward to support Jewish outreach to other minorities is our common status as victims. Although the haters in our country do often target Jews along with other minorities, this is not the basis for a meaningful relationship. Such a connection is too fragile and will dissolve when the haters change their targets. A dependency built on common victimization is also demoralizing for the partners. When asked why they should work together, can the only answer for blacks and Jews be "because they hate both of us"? Are there no other items on the common agenda for blacks and Jews to address? Cannot the Hispanic and Jewish communities identify items about which they both care deeply and can work together to accomplish? Do not Native Americans and Jews share something in common besides the negative identity created by hatred and bigotry?

With the end of the civil rights movement in which Jews and other minorities found common ground, the relationships seem to be based on what separates us rather than what might connect us. Affirmative action, bilingual education, and the Nation of Islam become the stumbling blocks to a meaningful relationship. Our dialogues get stuck on these speed bumps.

Although these issues are often the basis on which black and Jewish leadership interact, they are not the sound basis of a relationship. Rather they detract from the ability to build a relationship and could be discussed more successfully if, in fact, there was a meaningful relationship between the Jewish community and other groups.

Sadly, there is not. Except for the occasional local Seder or mission to Israel and the periodic mobilization on specific legislation in Washington there is nothing that even approximates a relationship between Jews and blacks, Jews and Hispanics, Jews and Asians, or Jews and Native Americans. On the religious front, where the connection with religious minorities can be built on a common theological foundation there are some relationships. But even those are tenuous at best and often derailed by differences on such social issues as abortion, school prayer, or tuition vouchers.

Typically the effort to build these intergroup relationships is based on the search for an agenda on issues internal to the two communities. I urge that the search for common ground be broadened. Rather than look for the issues that Jews and blacks have in common *as Jews and blacks*, that search should be refocused on what we have in common *as Americans*. Rather than seek the common ground between Hispanics and Jews in the problems each community is addressing, the relationship might be strengthened if the agenda had less to do with what Jews or Hispanics want and more to do with what Americans want.

This is not to suggest that each minority community give up the particularism of its agenda. Rather we should add to it a universalism for joint minority interests. Blacks should still work on the self-reliance and independence issues that are at the heart of their concerns. Hispanics and Native Americans should still struggle to balance integration into the mainstream with preservation of their cultures. Jews need to continue to worry about and work on Jewish continuity issues. But there needs to be a broader perspective in order to form and

maintain relationships.

What all minority groups share in common—regardless of the issues that separate them—is a dependency upon the strength of American democracy. Legal and governmental institutions provide the greatest protection against encroachment on hard-gained civil liberties. The common agenda of Jews and other minorities should be the maintenance and strengthening of the cornerstones of democracy and the institutions that implement them.

In practical terms, that effort should include protection of the freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Major—though not exclusive—emphasis should be placed on the First Amendment freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly. Recent assaults by religious extremists on the separation between church and state threaten all Americans, including minorities. The role of the media in shaping, if not creating news, as evidenced in the manipulations of the O.J. Simpson tragedy, should be of common concern.

Law enforcement, the courts, state and federal electoral policies, and the like provide a second area of common ground. Term limits, jury background research, and redistricting may be loosely disguised efforts to adversely affect minority interests in this country. In each of these initiatives, measures that purport to protect minorities have actually worked against them by giving an advantage to those who already possess economic and political resources. The contention that these efforts level the playing field is not borne out in practice. At the highest level, Supreme Court nominees represent more than personal presidential choice. The long-term effects of federal judicial appointments clearly demonstrate the need for concerted and joint action by minorities.

Local and national elections offer a third area for common enterprise. Stealth candidacies undermine the *process and intent* of American electoral politics by concealing their hidden agendas. Getting qualified people elected should be the goal of the pro-

cess. Having to spend time discovering what candidates really stand for is a corruption of the democratic process that Jews, blacks, Hispanics, and others can address conjointly.

The crisis in public education is another common ground for all Americans, but especially so for minorities. Strengthening public education benefits everyone, regardless of the degree to which a community participates in the system. Access to quality education should be addressed as much through the joint efforts of minority coalitions as through mandates of the federal government. When white students in Great Neck, New York are the beneficiaries of \$11,000 per student annually in school funding, in contrast to black students in the Bronx and Harlem who must get along with just \$5600 each and their counterparts in rural Mississippi who receive only \$1500 each, the problem is everyone's, not just the black community (Kozol, 1991). The development of teaching standards, funding standards, and performance standards can all be part of the common minority agenda.

Higher education can also be part of that agenda. When the low rates of high-school graduation within the black and Hispanic communities are combined with the prohibitive college tuition costs that restrict access to higher education, an increasing disparity between successful and unsuccessful groups develops. Can that not be part of a common agenda for Jews, Asians, blacks, and Hispanics?

Health care reform and welfare reform *ought* to be part of the common agenda, along with the environment and the economy. If parochial interests can be set aside to look at the broader picture there is surely substance for the relationship in these issues.

Too often Jewish-minority relations are conceptualized as the small area of intersection of each community. Like sets in algebra, we conceive the common area as only that where the circles of the set intersect. And we forget that the circles are only *part* of the universe, not the entire universe.

Although it may be possible and necessary from time to time to deal with a particular issue about which only blacks and Jews have a common interest, that should be the exception to the relationship, not the rule. Today, it is the rule.

How do we move the universal and common agenda forward? One way is to convene, at the national level, a summit that is universal in attendance and agenda. A summit that deals with the issues about which *all* minorities should be concerned. A summit that casts off the common victim status of Jews, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, gays and lesbians, Native Americans, women, and the rest. And from that summit should come working groups to address the issues affecting all Americans that were explored in this article.

At the local level we need to reconfigure the way we as Jews relate to other minority communities. The seders and missions should continue, but they should be extended, and made more inclusive. Bilateral relations should be replaced with multilateral relations. Each party would then retain its identity and particular agenda, but all would come together for a greater purpose, the strengthening of American democracy.

In the face of our own communal issues of survival, we Jews need to recognize the commonality of survival we share with other minorities. Democratic Congressman Major Owens of New York, responding to the divisive nature of the Nation of Islam controversy, speaks of the formation of "a caring majority" to carry out the work of freedom and justice in this country. It is the creation of that majority through the establishment of intergroup relationships that forms the basis for a common agenda for Jews and other minorities.

REFERENCES

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