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An Address



The Negro Revolution and the Jewish Community

agree, I should suppose, that few problems in the recent history of our poignant, the issue of perspective would be less troublesome. Yet we all Were the problem we are convened to think through together less

is the forest, and not the trees, which claims our attention. is, I gather, for purposes of strategy. Hence, at least in this context, it people, and though you are stationed at the front, our meeting today gestic the solution, for you here today are, of course, the captains of our-dier is going through may be an inept strategist. Yet the analogy suggests the incoming shells. And the captain who does not know what the sol-strategy of the general staff, investing his energies instead in dodging lines must be forgiven if he is not especially interested in the grand many of my friends in New York with events. The soldier on the front between my preoccupation with meaning and the preoccupation of so is the more valid perception, nor do I know quite how to bridge the gap many of you have a collection of anecdotes, and I am not certain which each tree in the murky forest is so starkly evident. I have a theory, and ly visible, is more reliable than the view from New York City, where that the view from Boston, in which the contours of the forest are plain-me to bring perspective to a brutally vexing question, yet I cannot claim It is with some diffidence that I rise this morning. You have asked

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community have so perplexed, so pained, so profoundly troubled us. None but the amnesiac can take anti-semitism, wherever and whenever it occurs, lightly, and none but the racist can be heartened by the deflection of Jews from their historic commitment to decency. To tread the line of responsibility, responding to anti-semitic outrage with dignity, while refusing to permit such outrage to serve as license for bigotry, is no easy matter. Events no longer move, they careen, and we with them; our lives are cluttered with crisis, there is no respite. In such an atmosphere of anguish, how can we retain balance, how can we insist on perspective? And how, having sought perspective, can we have any confidence that we have found it, that we ourselves are not misled, our own formulations distorted, our own prescriptions misguided?

So much for the sources of my diffidence. In enter them into the record at the outset not so much by way of private disclaimer as to encourage each of us to recognize that we are dealing here with a set of issues on which the claim of expertise is not at all convincing. I do not know what establishes a person as an expert on these matters, nor have I been, truth to tell, especially impressed with the responses of those who have presumed to speak with special credential. We are, all of us, groping towards understanding, and, much as we might wish it otherwise, there is no expert waiting in the wings to tell us what it is that has gone amiss, nor what scientific remedy will put an end to the present trauma. Strength of conviction is no substitute for wisdom, elegance of rhetoric no replacement for evidence, and, most assuredly, hysteria cannot be permitted to pose as reason, whatever its source. Hence, if my words be pretty, I ask you to discount that, for we cannot afford to be diverted by art any more than we can afford to be diverted by tears. We have a job to do, and the job is to understand where we are, and what we are to do.

I am constrained to begin with these words because the level of intolerance in our own community threatens to overwhelm us all, to subvert any serious efforts towards addressing the present crisis productively. Some of us are deeply persuaded that anti-semitism has reached crisis proportions, and others feel that such an assessment is wildly exaggerated. The one side accuses the other of blindness, the second accuses the first of backlash. The reciprocal assaults become increasingly strident, and, as many of you know better than I, old friends have stopped talking, old alliances have crumbled, old nostrums lost their healing power, old commitments come undone. How has such a situation come about?

We are dealing here, as I trust you will all agree, with two problems, and not with one alone. There is the issue of anti-semitism among black people, and there is the issue of our responses to it. In the best of all

possible worlds, the two would remain related, the action evoking the reaction, the reaction affecting subsequent action. This, of course, is not the best of all possible worlds, and action, reaction, and over-reaction feed insistently upon each other. It is difficult, in such an environment, to recognize the hard residual core of fact, to know what there was before people started screaming at each other. Perhaps the only fact of which we can any longer be certain is that black anti-semitism has recently increased in loudness, in intemperance, and in publication. Some have sought to dismiss this fact, to explain it, as if by explaining we can also explain away. Some are so dependent for their psychic enrichment on parasitic feeding off the problems of others that they refuse to countenance the possibility that those others are no replacement for a self. Thus, I. F. Stone could say "It will not hurt us Jews to swallow a few insults from overwrought blacks." Thus, Nat Hentoff could suggest that we ought invite the man who said Hitler should have made more lampshades out of us to a panel discussion. Such masochism hardly requires comment. It is part of our confusing heritage, and it surprises no one, though it displeases us all.

Yet, having agreed that anti-semitism, whatever its source, is an obscenity, and ought not pass unchallenged, we have not concluded the discourse. For the question that arises is what the nature of the challenge ought to be. I enter into evidence at this point the curious case of the Anti-Defamation League. A forthcoming scholarly study, sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League, shows that "in most important respects Negroes remain less anti-semitic than whites." The study will be published this summer. I do not know what coverage it will be given then, nor whether, given the kinds of things which are being said now, anyone will be prepared to take it seriously. Yet, though I have not seen the study itself, I assume it to be serious and reliable. And it is to be published under the sponsorship of the Anti-Defamation League. The Anti-Defamation League, you will recall, is the organization whose national director said, last October 2, that "the Jewish community would be well advised . . . to drop its preoccupation with Negro anti-Semitism." The ADL is the organization which issued a report, last October 23, informing us that it had studied various anti-semitic leaflets distributed in New York City, and found no evidence of any organized effort behind them. And it is the organization which, mid-way between last Fall's pacific appraisals and next Summer's reassuring evidence, chose to allege that raw and undisguised anti-semitism has been growing unchecked in this city for two and a half years. Well, perhaps that is so. I must tell you that a very careful reading of the 23 pages which purport to prove that it is so leave me quite unimpressed, and I would assume that anyone familiar with what the ADL was saying last Fall

and what it plans to say next Summer has the right to be, at the very least, skeptical about what it chose to say in January. Yet the January report made the front page of the New York Times, further reinforcing the already widespread conviction within the Jewish community that we are in a state of dire crisis, and further reinforcing the increasingly widespread conviction of many black people that Jews are out to get them. Since I find both judgments absurd, I regard it as essential that we try to reestablish some plausibility to the debate.

There are very serious conflicts of interest between the blacks and the Jews of New York City, and these conflicts, difficult enough to resolve in themselves, become totally unmanageable when they are charged with such accusations as anti-semitism or racial bigotry. Thus, for example, the issue of community control of the schools is a serious issue, which deserved to have been, and still deserves to be, debated by serious people. In fact what has happened is that parties to both sides in the debate have sought to divert attention from the real issues by moving from those issues to a direct ethnic confrontation.

The facts are plain: that there were expressions of black anti-semitism in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville dispute; that those expressions were exposed gleefully by the UFT, in an effort to discredit community control; that the relentless accusations of anti-semitism, sometimes justified, frequently exaggerated, were interpreted by blacks as an effort to tar their enterprise with this most unwholesome brush, even when the accusations came from thoughtful and concerned people, and that the debate over community control, therefore, got wildly out of hand, and led to the ugliness we have all witnessed. The chief casualty of these sorry events was not the Jewish people, nor even its equanimity; it was not even community control, or the black community. The chief casualty was reason, and hope, and that decent sensitivity without which no conflict of interest can be resolved.

I take such pains to say this because there now looms on the horizon still another issue, no less grave in its consequences, no less troublesome in its implications. The issue of racial quotas is just now emerging forcefully on our agenda, and, though we would clearly wish it otherwise, it will not go away. One of the most significant of the new strengths of the black community is its capacity to affect, quite directly, the public agenda of this nation. And the issue of quotas is, therefore, now part of that agenda.

I do not know whether the issue can usefully be compromised, or otherwise resolved. I do know that the issue cannot even be seriously addressed until it is thoughtfully formulated, away from the public platforms and the oratorical flourishes. And if the issue, in its earliest stages, comes to be seen as simply a code for anti-semitism, it will in-

evitably and tragically lead to precisely the same sort of confrontation we have already experienced. There are, surely, those who will allege that the merit system is a Jewish conspiracy. If we behave as we have in the past, the ensuing scenario is easily described. Jews, incensed at the implication of willful racist conspiracy, will allege anti-semitism. Those Jews whose future is most directly tied to the preservation of the merit system will take heart, realizing that they have found an issue of far greater emotional impact than the minutia of the merit system, and will seize upon every obscene anti-semitic expression, giving such expression far greater publication than it otherwise would have. The press, always delighted to find some new scandal with which to titillate its readers and boost its sales, will report each piece of trivia with zest. Those who seek to change the merit system will find themselves in an increasingly defensive alliance with those who seek to destroy it. Somewhere, along the way, the merit system itself will drop from the headlines, and ethnic confrontation will replace it.

Let us be absolutely clear. I do not know whether the merit system is capable, even through drastic reform, of accommodating the new assertiveness of blacks. I do not know, because I have not given the matter sufficient thought. But whether the issue can be resolved amicably or not in the abstract is not yet the point. The point of the moment is that it most assuredly cannot be solved in a reality or organic accusation. Not every issue is soluble, not every conflict of interest amenable to reasoned compromise. And not every conflict of interest, even a conflict in which the interests of many Jews are threatened, arises out of anti-semitism, just as not every conflict arises out of racial bigotry. To permit the argument so to be trivialized, to permit blacks who seek change to allege that it is Jewish bigotry which impedes change, or to permit Jews who resist change to allege that it is anti-semitic blacks who seek it, is to insure an intolerable confrontation. And to permit the good offices of the Jewish community to be exploited for the private benefit of groups who seek to win their organizational battles through using the issue of anti-semitism is to permit ourselves to be abused.

Now, all that I have said thus far seems to me so clear, so very obvious, that I have been, in recent months, increasingly perplexed by one nagging question: how is it that we have come to be so preoccupied with this issue? How is it that our perspective has come to be so distorted? If, as I believe, there is no plausible evidence of sinister conspiracy, how is it that our reaction to recent events has been so profound? For surely we recognize that even if every man, woman, and child in the black community, which numbers twenty-two million, were a rabid anti-semitic, which most assuredly are not, they would still total less than the number of white anti-semites in America. Surely we know

are confused, diverted, uneasy; now the intense anti-racist pressure even when we knew that our people were recalcitrant. And now we prodded and cajoled, and, failing all else, we have spoken our mind all, is that its leaders have always spoken more forcefully and more radically than its followers have felt. We have pushed and pulled, we have Americanness as well? The dirty little secret of our community, after the opportunity for bigotry as an opportunity for more conventional Americanness as well? The dirty little secret of our community, after that the assimilatory urge of so many Jews has led them to welcome of liberation, happy to be American by being bigots? Is it not possible ask ourselves whether some Jews have not reacted with a similar sense aware that anti-semitism is a popular pastime. Must we not, in candor, to anti-semitism, we objected not because she was wrong. We are well Mind" catalog, that blacks felt themselves more American as they turned Candice Van Ellison wrote, in her introduction to the "Harlem on My made acceptable, and even fashionable, by the tenor of the times. When what it is: the expression of deeply rooted and long-felt bigotry, now provocation as we have experienced must be identified precisely for a good deal lower than the angels. For much of the reaction to such Fourth, there is the tragic fact that we are still, in many of our parts, more general concern over law and order in our society.

raw, physical fear for personal safety that goes substantially beyond the it. That, I believe, is why I have begun to sense, in our community, as we. We have no stomach for it, no talent for it, no understanding of level, few people in America are so ill-equipped to deal with violence crisis in order, we are frightened, and offended. At the psychological the degree to which the present crisis in black-white relations is also well aware that we depend, for our survival, on law and order. And to Third, there is the issue of fear. Intellectually, American Jews are do not deserve such treatment, even by a few scurrilous people.

Second, there is the insult. As cliched as the phrase may be, surely a powerful case can and should be made that we, after all we have done, do not deserve such treatment, even by a few scurrilous people. One pointed out during Joe McCarthy's heyday, it rarely occurs to people that where there is smoke there may be a smoke machine. ly and energetically seek to fan the smoke into a conflagration. As some, too, in the midst of so delicate a balance, there are those who consciously and it becomes lower still each time we are assaulted anew. And then, alert to even the faintest whiff of smoke. Our threshold is painfully low, where there is smoke there is fire, and we have most delicate nostrils, One answer I have already suggested. People tend to assume that

that we are so suddenly and so massively affected? of anti-semitic fifth published in this country every day. Why is it, then, that even if every Negro newspaper and magazine were virulently anti-semitic, together they would still constitute but a drop in the bucket

which has been so central a part of the behavior of Jewish leadership over the years has been relaxed, and, as the pressure has relaxed, the latent bigotry has bubbled up. People today are saying things they may well have felt, but would not have dared to say, just a year or two ago. Which is to say, just at the time when courageous leadership was most wanted, it has been most wanting. By pursuing diversion, we have sanctioned bigotry. Once again, the genuine core of substantive dispute is difficult enough without compounding the difficulty by permitting, and even encouraging, diversion into the back-alleys of ethnic hostility. Fifth, and finally, and most distressing, in my view. I am not, after all, surprised that we are insulted, or surprised that we are afraid, or surprised that some of us are paranoid, or surprised that there are bigots in our midst. But surely all this does not explain the response of those who know better, of those who care more, of those who cannot sensibly be accused of bigotry, of those who have dealt before with constituency pressure, and have withstood it when they deemed it evil. How can we understand the behavior of our staunchest and most enlightened elements?

The clue, I believe, is embedded in the lead article in this month's *Commentary*, which many of you no doubt have seen. It is an article by Milton Himmelfarb, entitled "Is American Jewry in Crisis?", to which Mr. Himmelfarb's response is a decisive "yes." And if I understand his reasoning correctly, the crisis is centrally related to the black-Jewish confrontation. I am personally grieved by this, since there are few people from whom I think I have learned so much as from Mr. Himmelfarb, few whose contributions to our community I value more. I do not know, nor would I presume to guess, what it is that has led him to such uncharacteristic hyperbolic. I hasten to note that I use such words not because we differ in our assessment of the importance of the problem, though we do, and most decisively, but rather because, no matter what one's assessment, it seems to me clearly irresponsible to rebuke those who would minimize the import of the current crisis by asking rhetorically, as Himmelfarb does, whether they are not aware that "Anne Frank would not yet be forty." We are, I trust, still bound by our conviction that we are honorable men, all, and to suggest, however faintly, that those of us who disagree with his assessment treat the holocaust casually, if it is not an expression of hysteria, at least is injudicious. And worse than the personal insult, of course, is the fact that such hyperbolic rhetoric makes further discussion virtually impossible. For if we are no longer to discuss whether or not we face a serious problem, but rather whether or not we approve of Nazi behavior, then we are doomed.

It is Himmelfarb's position that we, by which I think he means white

liberals in general, have too often in the past deluded ourselves, a point which few would argue. We have deluded ourselves, he contends, because we have wanted to be lied to, a point with which I entirely agree. Our substantive disagreement is on the issue of which lie it is we have wanted to hear. For I too believe that American Jewry is in crisis, in serious crisis indeed, but I believe, as I pray you do as well, and as every serious student of our community does, that the serious crisis before American Jewry has very little to do with external attack, it has to do centrally with internal erosion. One symptom of that erosion, one reflection of our continuing inability to come to grips with the real agenda of our community, one aspect of our reluctance to become engaged with the insistent problem of developing a creative and vital Jewry in this country, is our apparent preference to engage in battles with external enemies. Himmelfarb, of course, is himself exempted from this indictment. But the point is nonetheless valid that, precisely at a time when there seemed to be some stirrings of creative energy within our community, precisely at a time when the agencies which sustain our community appeared to be prepared to reorder their priorities in favor of a more serious Jewishness, precisely when those of us who have been pleading for such a reordering had come to be taken rather seriously, this new stone has been dropped on our hearts. Not, if you will, the stone of black anti-Semitism, but the stone of hysterical over-reaction, diversion of communal energies into defensive patterns whose only virtue is that they are familiar, and whose chief liability is that they are so grossly unproductive. It is, as I have suggested elsewhere, as if we need anti-Semitism, need to be confronted by others, lest we be forced to confront ourselves.

I have, on other occasions, pointed out why I believe it to be so utterly mistaken for us so to misorder our communal priorities. I believe our mistake is compounded when it takes the form of investment of energies in anti-Semitism. That belief rests on three grounds, and it is with these that I conclude.

First: the new Negro assertiveness is, in its best versions, an audacious effort to force America to come to grips with real diversity. That is an effort we ourselves have not had the nerve to undertake. If the effort is now successful, we ourselves are likely to be among its unintended beneficiaries, for in an America prepared, at last, for pluralism, there will be more elbow room for Jewish assertiveness.

Lest you think this entirely hypothetical, I enter into evidence the fact that at Cornell University, not many months ago, a thousand of the Jewish students on campus demanded a department of Modern Jewish Studies; the fact that at a dozen high schools around the country, students are complaining that their ancient history courses omit all men-

tion of Palestine; or, more broadly, that the fundamentally patronizing character of the radical Jew who urges the black man to assert his identity but who is utterly uninterested in his own is so patent as to make that position simply not viable. The first hints that Jewish students, and radical Jewish students in particular, were coming to this recognition began to reach me some months ago. By now, the signs multiply almost daily, leading me to suggest that around the country, we have turned a corner, that Jewish students are learning to respect themselves as Jews by listening with care to what their black peers are saying. The lesson they are drawing is a lesson they did not, and, in fact, could not have learned from their own fathers, who have been so wrapped up in making Judaism easy that they have, on the whole, made it trivial as well.

Accordingly, it is a most serious error to confuse the ideological implications of the new Negro cohesiveness from its occasional anti-semitic manifestations. There is no necessary linkage between the two, and to reject the one because of the other is to throw out the baby with the bath.

Second: every dollar we spend on an ad protesting anti-semitism is a dollar not spent on rewriting the abysmal textbooks with which we presume to educate our young. Every hour we spend at conferences lamenting the black-Jewish crisis is an hour not spent on discovering our past, and every day spent at a symposium on the present turmoil is a day not spent refashioning our future. To be blind to the present is no solution; but to be fixated on the present alone is suicidal.

I put it to you, in the end, that even if my own assessment of the gravity of the present situation is dramatically wrong, even if the most gloomy pronouncements and the most sordid predictions are correct, even if the current confrontation is likely to issue in more serious antagonism than any yet imagined, my conviction that we ought not invest great attention in such matters is still a sound one. Not because black people need to be indulged, nor because we need to be slapped in the face, but quite simply and quite plainly because we have more serious matters to attend to, more urgent claims on our efforts and attention. In the end, after all, I know of no better way to cope with the insults of others than through pride in yourself. I think I can say this best by reading to you my answer to Nat Hentoff, who, when suggesting a panel discussion with the scoundrel he so lightly refers to as the "lampshade man" proposed as well that I join in the panel. I wrote: "I enjoy going to parties, but I shall have to pass up Nat Hentoff's invitation (*The Voice*, February 6, 1969) to engage in conversation with "the lampshade man"—the one who said as far as I am concerned, more power to Hitler. He didn't make enough lamp shades out of them; I cannot

imagine what rationalist fantasy prompts Mr. Hentoff to suppose that talking with so foul a person would do either of them any good. Which is to say, there comes a point at which discourse is both degrading and wasteful. To accept the obscenity in question as a basis for conversation is to take it seriously, when, in fact, it should either be ridiculed, or ignored, or spat upon.

"Mr. Hentoff knows that I believe American Jews have over-reacted to black anti-Semitism, and, thereby exacerbated the tension. Nonetheless, I do not believe that elaborate contortions, in an effort to demonstrate that we are, after all, lovable, are more seemly than backslash. Bending over backwards and falling flat on your face are equally uncomfortable positions, typically engaged in by those incapable of standing on their own two feet. Those who are comfortable with their Jewishness will not find it necessary to beg for the approval of others, nor will they be sent reeling by a tap on the shoulder, or even a slap on the face. They will stand firmly, and they will pursue justice."

Finally: if we are to build a community of nerve and purpose, as I believe we must, then, as I have suggested, we cannot permit diversions of the moment to interrupt our task. For to do so would, in effect, be to risk all of our tomorrows for this one passing today. It would, therefore, be to turn our backs on the Messiah. And that, as I trust you will readily agree, would be real anti-semitism.