

## NEGROES AND JEWS \*

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REGARD it as rare privilege to share a platform with Bayard Rustin. If Martin Luther King is the great prophetic figure of our age, demanding "Let My People Go," it is Bayard Rustin who is the pre-eminent sage of the Negro Revolution, seeing more clearly than anyone else the vision of the Promised Land, stretching beyond the Exodus, and the path we must take as a nation to reach it.

Negroes and Jews in America are bound together in a fascinating pattern of common bonds, ambivalences, and conflicts. In this paper I shall deal with the Jewish view of this relationship.

Among our common bonds are the following:

1. Jews helped considerably to build the stage on which the civil rights drama of our day is being played out. In the liberal-labor-Negro-Jewish coalition for civil rights during the past two decades, Jews often played a leading part. Our large national organizations produced many of the lawyers who drafted FEP and Fair Housing bills, and our groups helped provide the political know-how that put them over. Jewish publicists promoted better race relations with the full panoply of pamphlets, movies, banquets, awards, human

relations courses for students and policemen and teachers.

2. There is a remarkable identity between Jewish and Negro voting behavior. Among Jews, there is less gap between the liberal pronouncements of the leaders and the actual voting of the constituents than there is among either Protestants or Catholics. Jew and Negroes both gave upward of 85 percent of their votes to Kennedy and Johnson. This is not only significant in national elections where the urban vote becomes increasingly pivotal. It is even more marked in local civil rights referenda, as in California, Akron, Kansas City and elsewhere. There, one sees a remarkable development. Whereas 2 out of 3 white people in California voted for Proposition 14 to kill the Rumford fair-housing law, two out of three Jews voted with California Negroes against Proposition 14. In Kansas City, it was Negro and Jewish votes which together put over a fair-housing law. I do not minimize the white backlash. It is so ugly and omnipresent that I believe civil rights would fail in almost any local referendum unless there are enough Negroes and Jews to overcome the majority of white Christian votes.

3. In the South, where Jewish contributions to the civil rights struggle have been minuscule and where Jews until recently sought escape into neu-

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trality for reasons we understand, there has emerged a very real identity between Jewish and Negro self-interest. Despite all the drama and bloodshed, Negro demands in the South are still minimal: a few policemen, a few jobs, some token integration in the schools, and equal access to public accommodations. Achievements of these modest demands is in the Jewish self-interest too. Why? Jews are merchants, and racial strife has been shown to be very bad for business. Jews place high valuation on public schools; without integration public schools in the South are foredoomed to chaos and closing. And experience has shown that communities rocked by racial strife are breeding places for anti-Jewish as well as anti-Negro violence and bigotry. Not that all Jews in the South acknowledge this identity. But the clear stand of the U. S. Government has made it easier for many to do so, and the evidence is very clear.

4. Religion has been a common bond, especially in the South. The Negro protest movement in the South is religiously inspired. It identifies the Negro, in spiritual and in sermon, with the children of Israel in their struggle for freedom. The presence of rabbis in such Southern communities as Birmingham, Selma, and St. Augustine has been profoundly significant for many Negroes. I have never seen such a spiritual union of Jews and Negroes as in a church in St. Augustine, Florida, the night we prepared for our midnight march through the Slave Market. In Birmingham, Alabama SNCC kids wear yarmulkas they got from the Conservative rabbis there last year. In Selma, Negroes and Jews by the hundreds, joined by nuns, priests and Protestant clergy, conducted deeply moving Sabbath and Havdalah services. Judaism is being reborn down there, partly because it is linked with the powerful surge of human freedom in our own day.

And in its very nature, Judaism places great stress on the saving of society, on the responsibility of the total community for the weak and dispossessed. This stress, so unlike the Calvinist and Puritan notions of self-help and personal responsibility, is in harmony with the deep thrust of the Racial Revolution.

5. Increasingly, the presence of Black Jews compels white Jews to go beyond sentimental abstractions in their attitudes to civil rights. In Harlem and in Brooklyn, there are many thousands of Black Jews. We may argue about the legitimacy of the *smicha* of the elderly rabbi, or quibble about the peculiar practices and weird genealogy claimed by this group, but so long as they regard themselves as Jews, we cannot any longer dismiss them. Today a young, integrated, and idealistic group of white and black Jews is working with these people in Harlem, offering them the welcome of the mainstream Jewish community, introducing them to the resources and the encouragement of YMHA's, day schools, other synagogues, camps, printed materials, etc.

Among the sources of conflict, are the following:

1. Jews and Negroes do not know each other. Each sees the other through the prism of stereotypes. Because Jews live in the suburbs and frequently in self-ghettoized communities, we know Negroes largely as abstractions, as headlines, or as maids and servants. Negroes know us as slum landlords, exploiting store-keepers in the racial ghetto, or as employer. Our lack of human, peer-to-peer contact and communication washes out much of the good in the public positions taken and work done by Jewish groups in civil rights.

2. Jews have developed into Exhibit A of successful minority group adjustment to American life. We have arrived; we are middle class; we are, in

many ways, a status quo community. One result is that we hear, increasingly, the weary refrain from Jews: why can't they (Negroes) pull themselves up by their bootstraps the way we did. We have also developed a thankfulness complex. Negroes owe us gratitude for all we have done. Why don't they thank us? How dare they attack a Jewish merchant? Don't they know what we have done? And what are they doing for us in return? Why aren't they saving the 3,000,000 Jews in Russia for us? Thus is the fight for civil rights reduced to a popularity contest and a niggling question of Jewish public relations.

3. Jew react against conflict, seeking instead gradual progress and avoidance of tension. Negroes are not afraid of conflict, seeing in it the possibility of shocking the white conscience and leading up to creative solutions. Jewish groups continue to be intoxicated with words—resolutions, sermons, dialogues, conferences—but the Racial Revolution has already by-passed this stage and has taken to the streets and to other forms of direct action. For the most part, Jewish organizations have shrunk from following in this direction. Even the Freedom-Riding rabbi is regarded with cynical amusement by his own congregants, and no Jewish group has staked its prestige and its future on so daring a gamble as the Mississippi Summer Project, as the National Council of Churches has done. Jewish groups no longer lead in the Negro Revolution; they shouldn't—Negroes do and should. But many Jewish groups have become irrelevant to the struggle, their organizational needles struck in the groove of ten or fifteen years ago. By and large, even those Jewish groups wise enough to know what has to be done have preferred to stay just a few cautious steps ahead of the consensus of their followers.

This may be strategic but no one can pretend it is prophetic.

4. The crucible of the racial struggle is the big Northern city. But Jews have long since abandoned these cities, carrying their synagogues on their backs into the homogenized white suburbs of our nation. In a city like Cleveland, Ohio, there are literally no Jews left in the center city to make their weight count for civil rights. In suburbia, Jews live overwhelmingly—and somewhat guiltily—in segregated flesh-pots. They help to organize fair-housing committees, only to find that Jewish resistance to the entry of Negroes is not much different from Christian resistance, with the one qualification that Jews are almost never violent in their resistance. Jews and their children are genuinely culturally deprived—deprived of the clash and the exhilarating exchange of differences in color and religion and economic groups—but it would be quixotic to pretend that many Jews feel this void. Jewish complacency in suburbia is matched only by Jewish accommodation to affluence and the challenge of golf, stocks, and trips abroad.

5. When Negroes challenge the middle class, Jews are scared like everybody else, sometimes only more so. The Jewish commitment to education is such that thousands of Jews in Queens, New York lapse into hysteria when integration plans seem to threaten the academic standards of their children's schools. Jews have flourished on the principle of individual merit; they are disturbed by suggestions of preferential quotas and group representation. When a Negro crowd in Harlem beats up a policeman for seeking to make a legitimate arrest of a Negro hoodlum, Jews—and all other middle-class denizens—inflate the incident into a clear and present danger to law and order. There is no longer any patience with sociological explanations

about the psychological damage and dehumanization which comes from powerlessness and ghetto life. Jews tend to isolate out such incidents of Negro evil-doing, especially anti-Jewish activities, and a generalized anxiety seeps through the Jewish consciousness, distorting and confusing reality. That Negroes do this with Jews too only complicates the problem.

6. My deepest worry is whether or not Jews will be willing and able to follow the logic of the civil rights movement into the radical socio-economic change which Bayard Rustin has so eloquently outlined. The Negro Revolution has led inexorably to the war on poverty. It is now being joined, increasingly, and I believe correctly, to issues of foreign policy—the arms race, Viet Nam, the Dominican Republic. Most Jews feel themselves committed to civil rights and permit their Jewish organizations to implement that commitment. But what would happen if the A.D.L. and the American Jewish Congress sought to protest American policy in Viet Nam? They would be slapped down by their constituents. Yet every great reform movement in American life has petered out in the financial and emotional expense of wars. We can forget about the Great Society if we cannot turn back the arms race and turn those billions of dollars into slum clearance, education, full employment, hospitals, mental health clinics, and a real war on poverty. Harrington has said we would need \$100 billion for such a poverty war. It is not in the cards the way our foreign policies are

heading now. Will Jews follow the logic of the Civil Rights Revolution into a demand for overhaul of our economic system which obviously failed to provide for human needs and not just for Negroes? Will Jewish organizations fight for full employment, vigorous housing programs, national planning, immeasurably increased public works programs? I have my doubts. Few of our organizations even consider these matters within their scope of concern. Perhaps only the synagogue groups will, if they have the courage, be able to express the Jewish imperative in these social causes.

Bayard Rustin has pointed the way we must go as a nation. Jews could make a valuable contribution to that re-creation of America. But how are we going to move the immovable middleclass, comfortable, successful, and complacent members of our boards—whether temples, civic groups, civic defense agencies, or welfare agencies—into the daring and even dangerous commitments which the beckoning future demands? I don't know. We will have to remind them that Judaism is a revolutionary religious faith, bent on nothing less than remaking the world. That our mission as Jews is not mere accommodation but to be a light unto the nations. That the prophets of Israel did not care about conflict, or consensus, or timing; they only cared about God's justice. In the words of an ancient rabbi: the hour is late. The Master is urgent. It is not incumbent upon us to complete the task; but neither are we free to desist from it.