Blaming the Jews

Peter I. Rose

The question "Of all people, why the Jews?" is often prefaced with the phrase, "Given all they have done and their close alliance with civil rights causes. . . ." This query is now being raised in many public symposia and private discussions on black/Jewish relations and the rising anti-Semitism spewing forth from campus platforms and over public airwaves.

One straightforward and only half-facetious answer is "Why not?" After all, even in America, where they have achieved unprecedented success, Jews remain a vulnerable minority and ready scapegoat. For all their achievements in business, the professions, the arts—or, more likely, because of them, Jews are still viewed with considerable ambivalence, especially by those Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab once called "the never-hads."

Some of those never-hads, particularly those who are more formally described today as "disadvantaged, non-white minorities," see Jews as models to emulate. Others within the same ranks, however, take a different stance. Not a few African Americans have turned the bitterness at the societal barriers that have thwarted them and their resentment at others' attainments into a causative relationship. ("The only reason for the Jews' success is that it was achieved at somebody else's expense; namely, ours.") Going even farther some have begun to wage vitriolic campaigns against these "Jewish profiteers." No matter what the situation, Jews are both convenient and useful targets upon whom to vent pent-up frustrations and to blame for every conceivable misfortune.

The most virulent expressions of antipathy recently voiced by certain African Americans sound strikingly like the sort of things white anti-Semites have said for years. Once again, Jews are grotesquely characterized as everything that is underhanded and loathsome. "Hook-nosed, lox-eating, money-grubbing vultures." Some say they are even diabolical enough in their deviousness to have created and perpetuated the "myth of the Holocaust."

Some of the charges of the black Jew-haters are more specific. Jews are described as the principal slave traders and slave owners; as the quintessential exploiters of blacks in the ghettoes who "drain[ed] their patrons of their lifeblood before turning over the task to Arabs, Koreans, and others;" as the main opponents of any government policies that would favor African Americans and other downtrodden groups through affirmative action practices while being in favor of continued suppression of Palestinians and other Third World peoples. While the rantings of a few are hardly the views of the majority, recent surveys indicate that many African Americans have perceptions of Jews that are hardly complementary. Not infrequently, these views, in some form or other, are found among those who one would expect to think differently.

The long-documented generalization of an inverse relationship between levels of education and levels of anti-Semitism is being challenged by evidence of high negativity even among well-educated blacks, especially teenagers and young adults. Recent surveys show that nearly one in four black respondents

under thirty, including those who are highly educated, are unfavorably disposed toward Jews. In older age groups, the "education correlation" still appears to be holding. Much of this may be attributable to the success of the campus crusades mounted by Louis Farrakhan and other charismatic advocates of communal pride, spiritual uplift, political mobilization—all seemingly dependent on the need to define an enemy. Almost using the words of Adolf Hitler, for clear intents and purposes they, too, are saying "the Jews are our misfortune."

Jew-hating may be more a placebo than a panacea, but it is a bitter medicine.

While it is doubtful that Farrakhan or Khalid Abdul Muhammad or others, who have been widely quoted for their diatribes against "Jewish interests" and, not infrequently, Jews themselves, ever read Georg Simmel, like so many others who need scapegoats to advance their own causes, they clearly understand the concept of "the third element." Third elements not only greatly complicate social relationships and provide "opportunities for transition, conciliation, and the abandonment of absolute contrast," as Simmel said, they also offer a vehicle for considerable manipulation of the other parties, even by the weakest member. What the black demagogues are seeking to do—and to gain—is what many others have tried before.

In a comment in *Time* magazine, published along with those of others on February 28, 1994, Midge Decter put it differently, but the implication of her remarks was clearly similar. The sharply focused attention on Jews as enemies, she said, offers a kind of political methadone in an environment in which other forces are difficult to control.

Jew-hating by blacks (at least certain black leaders) may be more a placebo than a panacea but it is bitter medicine, leaving a terrible aftertaste, and not only for those who swallow it. A notable backlash can be seen in increasing reluctance among Jews to take the traditional stance in explaining (some now say "explaining away") many of the extreme actions of those who have long been seen as victims of an oppressive, unfair system. Others, among them Leon Wieseltier, Cornel West, and Michael Lerner, who were also quoted in the same *Time* forum on "The Rift Between Blacks and Jews," offered different interpretations from Decter's, though almost all, regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, made distinctions between attitudes about and relations between blacks and "whites" and those about and between blacks and Jews.

Such distinctions are a central theme in Paul Berman's essay "The Other and the Almost the Same," published the same day in February 1994. Though he does not use the word "triadic," Berman describes a relationship between blacks and Jews (and other whites) in the United States, at least in the twentieth century, that has been precisely that. Berman removes Jewish Americans from the category "white" but he does not put the non-white Jews and the blacks together in a single category. While both are literally minorities, they have very different backgrounds and cultures and have had very different experiences in trying to make it in America.

Berman goes even farther and suggests that "American Jews and the African Americans have never looked or sounded alike" and claims that "the difference in economic conditions has become more pronounced since the days of bedbug-Jewish-tenement poverty." Although there are exceptions, seen most clearly in similarity of outlooks, manners, mores, and politics of substantial segments of today's black and Jewish middle-classes, Berman's contention is still quite valid. There is little doubt that the significant gap related to the rates of mobility within the two groups has long been and remains an underlying source of tension. It is not the only one. There is also the matter of "relative suffering."

While it has frequently been argued that the two groups do have a common bond owing to their confrontation with bigotry and discrimination, even here, as Berman says, "[T]he shared history of having someone's boot press on their vulnerable necks, . . . has taken such different forms for blacks and for Jews as to be barely comparable."

In point of fact, what the groups have had is a complex relationship with—and equally complex opinions of—each other. While many, including many blacks, see Jews as far more "white" than "colored," a sentiment certainly shared by most Jews in this country, many Jews would note that they are as different from African Americans as they are from many white Christians, two cohorts which are, to Jews, in certain ways quite similar. The main reason for this is that, despite the circumstances that forced them to come to America as involuntary migrants and the caste lines that formally kept them apart, most contemporary African Americans share a common rural, Protestant

tradition and culture with the southern, white Christians, a tradition and culture quite different from that even of those few Jews who grew up in the South.

Although quite ignorant of Jewish suffering in medieval and modern Europe, those who used to be called Negro did share a sense of biblical affinity for they long identified themselves with the time "When Israel was in Egypt's Land" and with the call to "Let My People Go." The imagery linked the beleaguered blacks to Pharaoh's Jewish slaves.

Yet, on the occasions when they did meet or interact with real Jews, they did not encounter Moses—or Joshua or David, the Giant Killer, but merchants and doctors who, seemed to have little connection to their spiritual icons. And while it may well be true that, as many African Americans claim, they could not tell who was Jewish merely by looking ("White folks are white folks") and did not know any Jews personally, many still allow that they knew about them, and knew that they were different from those in the dominant sector, the white Christians.

Those differences, couched in varied ways—some religious, some political, but mostly economic—are well fixed in the folklore of the Old South where, as Harry Golden once said "the Jewish store is as commonplace as the Confederate monument that stands in the town square." Black storytellers frequently acknowledged the Jewish presence, limited though it was, in their very regional *Weltanschauung*. A common opener was: "One day a Negro, a white man, and a Jew. . . ."

In the North, where more than 98 percent of Jewish immigrants had settled in the years between 1880 and 1925, the greenhorns from the cities and shtetls of Eastern Europe constantly compared themselves and measured their own progress against that of the "real Americans" (meaning, of course, old, native-born white people, not Indians) and other newcomers. Rarely were they referring to African Americans, who were then in the early stages of their own great migration.

For black migrants moving north, it was a given, a fact of life, that white people, like those they had known back home, no matter how poor, were privileged members of the society, privileged enemies. The optimism with which they moved to the cities of New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago was always tempered by the realization that northern whites might not be all that different from those in the South. And black Southerners often proved to be quite prescient. While not legal, segregation was a fact of life within every nook and cranny of their new "promised land."

Owing to their precarious economic situation, the African American migrants generally moved into the cheapest parts of town. Many such areas were already heavy with the presence of people who looked stranger, sounded stranger, and acted stranger than the sort of white folks they knew so well. If those who were white were an already known entity to be guarded against, the immigrants, among them large numbers of recently arrived East European Jews, were something else altogether.

Jews became increasingly prominent among the merchants, employers, and landlords met by black migrants.

In several cities, it would not be long before the very American blacks who settled in mixed communities or in nearby enclaves would have their confusion compounded by the fact that the ghettoes that seemed to serve as way stations for the foreign immigrants were for them more characteristic of their original, medieval form, that is, places of confinement. Recognition of the relativity of their freedom vis-à-vis the immigrants was further aggravated by the belief, which often had a sound basis in truth, that it was those newcomers, sometimes Jewish, who were most directly in control of their lives. While they did not run the cities or own the banks, Jews became increasingly prominent among the people who employed them, sold to them, rented to them, loaned them money, all the while preparing for their own or, more often, their children's move outward and upward.

In a famous essay about his Harlem childhood, James Baldwin noted, "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 second hand shoes. . . ." Baldwin's perception was that of thousands of others who grew up in similar circumstances. It is not hard to see how easily it could be asserted that what Jews accomplished could only be done by contrivance and connivance at the expense of those in the weakest power positions, like the blacks. This assumption received added credence by the fact that, more quickly than the offspring of other newcomers, second generation Jews soon began to achieve power and influence in the political and economic arena, and in public institutions where they became welfare workers, school teachers, and government officials. Moreover,

many of the stereotypes already held about their intentions and involvements, their talents and their proclivities to push themselves and their children appeared to be reified wherever blacks looked. Jews seemed to have a knack for taking hold of their own lives and those of others.

Jews related the enslavement, segregation, and ghettoization of blacks with their own past history.

During the same time period, "whites" had their views of African Americans (and of Jews as well), while Jews were developing their own perspectives on their colored neighbors, some reflected the most common views of those in the majority but many were more their own. Some of their notions were quite positive; others quite negative. Almost all were about people who were different than they themselves. Blacks were seen as long-suffering, religious, physically strong, athletically and musically talented, and "cool." Not a few immigrant kids looked favorably at such traits, especially the latter ones. But the Negroes were also thought to be irresponsible (a variation on "shiftless"), untrustworthy, prone to violence, and sexually aggressive.

American Jewish humor often reflected these mixed perceptions. It was evident in the jokes exchanged on the mean streets of the old ghettoes and the whispered jibes made about "the shvartzes." It was standard fare on the Borscht Circuit in the resorts of the Catskills and in the clubs of the cities. It is still evident in the vulgar slurs, challenging political correctness, in Jackie Mason's latest Broadway show. Jews, so sensitive to slights and stereotypes themselves, were not—and are not—exempt from criticism for their own prejudices.

What is perhaps most remarkable, given the fact that blacks and Jews were really such strangers to one another, is that they ever managed to have any sort of significant relationships or that they ever got together for common causes. But, as is well known, they did.

As Paul Berman, among many others, rightly suggests, this point should not be dismissed as just so much rhetoric. However great the differences of history and culture and temperament, real as well as symbolic bonds helped to establish and then maintain one of America's most important and long-lived progressive confederations. The now-so-mightily-strained (many call it the "broken") alliance was once so powerful as to have been a model for coalition building. It had started quite modestly.

In northern cities, in league with early advocates of organized defenses against racial and religious injustice, increasing numbers of educated and politically active children of Jewish immigrants, few of whom knew much about Africa or the African diaspora, came to relate the enslavement, segregation and ghettoization of America's blacks to their own past history. (An interesting variation on the "biblical" theme mentioned previously.) From the earliest decade of the twentieth century Jews and blacks were tied together in the battle for civil rights and against the common foes of bigotry and discrimination. Many Jewish philanthropists and many more less well endowed Jews joined forces with black leaders in the earliest days of the struggle. Jews were prominent among the founders and funders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund, and numerous related organizations.

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s, the very period when the close-at-hand economic symbiosis was most acute, prominent representatives of both groups were key figures and rank and file members of both leftist and liberal organizations fighting for human and civil rights. Throughout the Civil Rights Era, many Jews marched and some of them died alongside blacks in the dramatic campaigns to overcome segregation. In a kind of paean to the whole connection, Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "It would be impossible to record the contribution Jewish people have made toward the Negro's struggle for freedom, it has been so great."

For many African Americans today, especially those too young to have experienced the turbulent conflicts and bittersweet victories of the 1950s and 1960s, words of praise and thanksgiving like those voiced by King have a hollow ring. Even before King's assassination, other, more inflammatory black leaders began to say they were growing tired of hearing how much Jews had done for them and many began saying things that were much worse. These revisionists further began to proclaim that, even in the very specific social settings and political contexts where blacks and Jews had marched together, they had not really been partners. They (the African Americans) were pawns; causes to be taken up; people to be pitied or manipulated for others' psychological needs ("guilt trip" became a common expression), or for more nefarious purposes.

Needless to say, most Jews vehemently disagreed with such characterizations, feeling and sometimes stating quite openly that they were hurt and puzzled

and terribly disappointed by the failure of those who criticized them to recognize all that they had done in fostering the cause of integration.

Perhaps a significant part of the problem lies in that key word "integration." For many years, to many whites (and Jews)—and many blacks— when it came to the plight of African Americans, it was generally considered something more akin to the old one-way process of assimilation than to acceptance and mutual respect.

Integration was more than desegregation (breaking down the legal barriers); it was an ideological commitment to lift those who were stigmatized and labeled "culturally deprived" out of the misery of their estate, enabling them to benefit from full access to the advantages of mainstream (read white) society. Going to white institutions, joining formerly all-white clubs, finding employment in once-segregated organizations, and similar goals were all seen as ways of enhancing fulfillment. Integration meant leaving the past and becoming a part of the future.

However reasonable its intent, it is likely that such an orientation implicitly and sometimes quite blatantly denigrated much that was—and, even more, was to become—meaningful to the Americans from Africa, especially after the sea change that took place in the middle of the 1960s. With the onset of the consciousness-raising movements of the 1960s, many came to resent the *noblesse oblige* assumptions of the so-called integrationists much as Jews and other newcomers had resented the schemes for their "Americanization" early in this century.

For years, the majority of American blacks who led or joined the fight for civil rights, like their allies, saw progress in movement from the margins of society to the mainstream. Because their marginality was related to the basest caste-like distinctions proscribed by the color bar rather than cultural and religious ones, "overcoming" seemed far more important than asserting uniqueness of culture or character. Save for the early nationalists and Garveyites, few blacks spoke of "cultural pluralism" and fewer of "separatism" until sometime in the mid-1960s. (Talk of "multiculturalism" and "Afro-centricity" was to came much later.) A series of events, catalyzed by the shooting of James Meredith, during his ill-fated march across Mississippi, and electrified by the strident call for "black power" which reverberated around the country, signaled the birth of a new era that would cause whatever rifts there had always been to begin to yawn wider and wider with each passing decade. Beginning with what Kenneth Clark once called their own "declaration of independence," many in the movement broke rank with their most steadfast supporters.

Julius Lester, an African American convert to Judaism and astute observer of both communities, put the changing climate into bold relief: "While Jews consider themselves liberal, blacks consider them paternalistic."

Disagreement over the efficacy of affirmative action added to the growing estrangement.

Within a year or two many whites, including a disproportionately large percentage of Jews, were eased or pushed from positions of civil rights leadership. Soon other events contributed to the growing estrangement: urban riots in predominantly black neighborhoods, some of which were still inhabited by Jewish old-timers—or whose shops were owned and run by them; mounting demands for community control of New York schools, where many teachers and principals were Jewish; pressures for open enrollment of public city universities; and growing disagreement over the efficacy and implementation of affirmative action policies mandated to insure greater representation of those who, along with Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans, had come to be officially designated as "minorities."

The specter of institutionalized targets and goals, however "benign" these quota-like objectives were said to be, was (and remains) particularly upsetting to those all too familiar with Nuremburg racial laws and the home-grown *numerus clausus* first imposed by Harvard President Lowell and copied by many other university administrators and corporate leaders to keep a "balance." (In an ironic twist, this old device to keep Jews out is now having a replay in some parts of the country where highly qualified Asian Americans are finding that they are not being accepted at the colleges of their choice because including them would contribute to furthering their overrepresentation. This, among many other things, has led to the widely publicized increase in tension between Asians who, though ostensibly members of an affirmative action category, are enduring reverse discrimination and others who are less well qualified who are not only wanted but wooed in order to meet the goals.)

Withal, there is little question that what many blacks are thinking about Jews today is, in large measure, a narrowly focused reflection of a deeply rooted triple

sense of powerlessness, dependency, and envy that is, at bottom, less about the nature of their particular relationship and more about being left behind. It is about the persistence of discrimination, an increasing sense of isolation, and a growing feeling of desperation. What rankles is that Jews have made it and they, whom Jim Sleeper has called, "the closest of strangers," have not.

Many African American leaders know all this and are seeking to confront it in constructive ways, not least by trying to engage in dialogues with still sympathetic (if not always empathetic) outsiders, especially Jews. Their goal is to re-form alliances based on mutual respect and common commitments. But many others seem too willing to accede to demagoguery and demonology, to blame the Jews for all their problems, or, if not that, to remain still when they witness such blatant scapegoating and rabble rousing. They and the members of what is in fact a highly stratified and quite diverse community, and the now-wary Jews, are not the only players, of course.

In keeping with the triadic formulation that is far more than a heuristic distinction, the third party (actually the first—for it is truly the most powerful), including many of its more traditional liberal members, gives new meaning to the expression "silent majority." Few voices have been raised to counter the campaign of vilification. The lack of strong opposition to Jew-baiting in much of the white community is most unfortunate but hardly surprising. But to see such a lack of public reaction as agreement with the extreme expressions of hate is to grossly misread the situation. If there is any Machiavellian plan underlying the statements of Farrakhan and his minions holding Jews responsible for every conceivable wrong within society and, especially, the current condition of black America in order to win white support, the effort will prove futile, even counterproductive. Those few white Christians most apt to resonate to rhetoric of the African American anti-Semites about Jewish control are likely to be most vehemently anti-black as well.

Thus, aside from instilling pride by increasing group chauvinism—and group narcissism—at the expense of further alienation of those who have been most helpful in the past, it is highly doubtful that the net effect of the tactics being used on the streets and on the campuses will serve either the purpose of *divide et impera* (one of the ploys outlined by Simmel) or help to overcome the real problems of African Americans, particularly those in the seething caldrons of the urban ghettoes. More likely, they will deepen the divisions between blacks and others, "white" as well as Jewish.

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