

Blacks and Jews: Different Kinds of Survival

by Letty Cottin Pogrebin

Letty Cottin Pogrebin is a founding editor of *Ms.* This article is adapted from her new book, *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America* (Crown). It appeared in *The Nation*, September 23, 1991, pp. 332-336.

According to a Yankelovich poll, in the last quarter-century anti-Semitism has declined among Whites but increased among Blacks. Today Blacks are twice as likely as Whites to hold significant anti-Semitic attitudes and, even more alarming, it is younger and better-educated Blacks who tend to be the most bigoted. By the same token, although a 1990 poll done by the National Opinion Research Center found that Jews have more positive attitudes toward Blacks and a greater commitment to equal opportunity than do other white Americans, the poll also found that a majority of Jews do not favor government help or government spending to benefit Blacks. Worse still, a Harris poll found that Jews are more likely than other Whites to be upset if Blacks move into their neighborhood; and 20 percent of Jews said they did not want their children to attend school with Blacks, as compared with only 14 percent of other Whites.

In light of the recent controversy over Professor Leonard Jeffries' views and the continuing confrontation between African-Americans and Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn's Crown Heights section, it's fair to say that Black-Jewish relations are at one of their periodic flashpoints. No longer can Blacks and Jews be drawn together simply because other Americans hate us both. No longer can we expect each other to agree on what constitutes racism, anti-Semitism or institutional barriers to equal opportunity. No longer can a single speech or slogan move us to march together. Now we often march in opposite directions or face each other across an abyss. Now our two communities clash regularly over issues of power, priorities, competitive oppression and conflicting self-interest. Now it takes arguing, negotiating and struggling to find common ground within our changed circumstances and new suspicions. Now I know that Black-Jewish coalition building takes work and leaves scars.

During the 1984 presidential campaign, when Jesse Jackson was excoriated for his "Hymietown" statement and full-page ads appeared from an organization called "Jews Against Jackson," the growing enmity between our two communities reached a boiling point. In response, several Black-Jewish dialogues were started. One of them was a consciousness-raising-type group composed of three Blacks and three Jews, founded by Harriet Michel, then president of the New York Urban League, and myself. That group is still meeting regularly. Also in 1984, I helped to form a thirty-member Black-Jewish women's group whose purpose was to prepare our two communities to play a constructive role at the Nairobi United Nations Conference on Women. Although it continued meeting after the conference was over, this group petered out within two years. At first, I attributed its failure to waning Black interest.

"Why do you think so many Black women stopped coming to our dialogue meetings even though we started out with an equal representation?" I asked a Black friend who had been part of the group.

"You Jews have to stop acting like God's chosen people," she barked, her eyes hard and angry. "The world doesn't revolve around you. Relations with Jews are not a priority for most African-Americans; our main concern is survival."

The differences between Blacks and Jews are rarely more obvious than when each group speaks about its own "survival," a word that both use frequently but with quite dissimilar meanings. For Blacks, survival means actual physical endurance staying alive in the face of violent crime, drugs, hunger, homelessness, and infant mortality rates that are more than triple those of Whites; it means surviving as a viable community when 30 percent of the adults and 75 percent of the young live in poverty, when 44 percent of Black 17-year-olds are functionally illiterate and Black unemployment is twice the white rate. For Jews, survival means keeping a minority culture and a religion alive against all odds, guarding against anti-Semitism and the slippery slope that could lead from hate speech to the gas chambers, and helping to guarantee the security of Israel.

In other words, Blacks worry about their actual conditions and fear for the present; Jews worry about their history and fear for the future. Black survival is threatened by poverty; Jewish survival is threatened by affluence (with its temptation of intermarriage with the more privileged majority), assimilation and moral corruption. Racism is a bacterium, potentially curable but now deadly; anti-Semitism is a virus, potentially deadly but currently contained.

“In America, though permitted to be rich, Jews are not permitted to be comfortable,” asserts writer Leonard Fein. When those who make us uncomfortable are Black- for instance, Spike Lee, whose film *Mo’ Better Blues* included the gratuitously stereotyped nightclub owners Joe and Josh Flatbush; or the rap group Public Enemy, whose best-selling record called Jews “Christ killers” and whose “Minister of Information,” Professor Griff, said, “Jews are responsible for the majority of wickedness that goes on across the globe”, or talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who benignly accepted the claim of a guest that Jews murder children for religious ritual; or Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu, who lectured Jews on forgiving the Nazis for the murder of the Six Million- we Jews somehow feel more threatened and betrayed, expecting better from our former allies. The color of the perpetrator does not determine the degree of our safety, only the degree of our surprise.

A totally assimilated Jewish friend of mine says he can never relax as long as a swastika is painted on even one wall in America. I have a recurrent dream in which my children and I are being herded into cattle cars en route to Auschwitz. Every Jew remembers that our people were powerful and well-off in the 1930s in Berlin and Prague and Warsaw, but their prosperity didn’t save them. We remember how quickly Jews and Israel were scapegoated in the United States during the gas shortages of the 1970’s and the farm crisis of the 1980s. We notice that no matter how few we are, Jews are blamed for the slightest economic reversal in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and France. In 1991, we heard whispers that the war in the Persian Gulf was the fault of the Jews. So, regardless of what we have accomplished in life we continue to fear the swastika and smell the smoke. In fact, the more we flourish, the surer we are that the anti-Semites are out there begrudging our success. As the old joke would have it, paranoids have enemies too.

My cattle-car dream takes me unawares every few years, like a dormant parasite that eats away at the intestines with no apparent provocation. I have toured the Dachau concentration camp near Munich, but that was long before I had children. I lost relatives to the Nazis, but my own immediate family, spawned in the 1960s, has never been in danger. Still, I dream that dream. I tell this to my Black friend with the angry eyes. I want her to remember that in her lifetime and mine, one out of every three Jews in the world was slaughtered. “Even if never personally threatened, you would need constant reassurance if one-third of your relatives had been murdered,” I tell her.

My friend listens but she still doesn’t get it. She grew up in a neighborhood where Jews collected the rent, ran the shops, employed Black domestic workers, checked up on welfare clients and taught Black children. She works now in New York City, where every Jew she sees is thriving. She points out that 30 million American Blacks have only twenty-six Congressional representatives and no Black senators, while 6 million American Jews have thirty-three Jewish members of the House and eight Jewish senators. Through her eyes I see how it might seem unbelievable that a people so affluent, powerful and white could possibly be quaking at the summit.

How very differently our two out-groups view the world. To Blacks, America is the nation that enslaved them and continues to deny them opportunities. To Jews, it is a promised land that made good on its promises. Blacks worry that their (bad) situation will never improve-therefore their issues are fundamental issues like affordable housing, better education and affirmative action. Jews worry that our (good) situation will not last-therefore our issues are safety issues like freedom of religion (separation of church and state), freedom of immigration (Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews) and a secure Israel. To summarize these complex differences in an over-simplified statement, African-Americans need relief in the form of normalized group and individual acceptance.

Assistance. Acceptance. Clearly these needs are not comparable, but they can be experienced with comparable intensity and they can lead people to the same place. Thus, Blacks enter into dialogue in the hope it will result in action to address their needs, while for Jews, dialogue is the need: If Blacks are still

talking to us, we think, maybe the liberal alliance is not dead, maybe we don't have to stand alone, maybe we can feel a little safer in America.

Dialogue has taught me that each group inaccurately perceives the negative power of the other. Blacks are not really in a position to hurt Jews, but because of their superior numbers and a few high-profile anti-Semites, Jews fear them. Jews are not really in a position to hurt Blacks, but Blacks believe we are determined to keep them down. African-Americans are saying, If we're supposed to be brothers and sisters, how come you're doing so well and we're in the streets? Jews are saying, If we're supposed to be friends, how come you keep picking on us?

Maybe Jews and Blacks lock horns more than other groups because we are the only ones who take each other seriously, the only minority groups who seem to believe that our destinies are interwoven. (There are innumerable Jewish-Black dialogues, but where are the Italian-Black or Irish-Black conclaves?) Or maybe we are encouraged to fight in public as surrogate combatants for the bigots in the dominant culture. As the media magnify every Black-Jewish clash, other Americans can let off steam vicariously while avoiding the anger that might otherwise be directed at them. Meanwhile, Blacks and Jews get hooked on the oldest scam in the world: divide and conquer.

I refuse to let that happen. While I had been hurt by my friend's angry words, talking with her clarified that I was the one who had not understood. I had suggested that there was something wrong with African-Americans for dropping out of the dialogue, when in fact there was something wrong with the dialogue for failing to serve the needs of its Black participants. Because the Jewish agenda -creating alliances- was being fulfilled, Jews kept showing up at the meetings. But the Black agenda -cooperative activism- had stalled, so some Black women had stopped coming. It was as simple as that. Beneath her fury, my friends was really saying, "Stop complaining. Your needs are being met and mine are not." She saw Jews getting what they craved (acceptance), while what Blacks craved (assistance) wasn't forthcoming.

Given their survival emergencies, the African-Americans in many of these dialogue groups have become impatient with the Jewish need for feel-good talk about the old civil rights alliance. Our African-American dialogue partners want to be seen as equals. They want to focus on today's realities. They want us to regard the underclass as a human problem, not a Black problem, and Black advancement as a moral imperative, not a quid pro quo for Black-Jewish friendship. They want us to stop telling them what we have in common and to start listening to Black assessments of our differences. They want to use our political and economic power to get some action.

Blacks are asking Jews to go beyond tension reduction into practical, nitty-gritty activism and advocacy work. They want biracial teams to organize and lobby for economic and social programs in the areas of affordable housing, child care, health, dropout prevention, education and drug treatment. They want us to mount joint press conferences, petition campaigns, conferences, demonstrations, vigils and fact-finding trips. They want public education projects, guest columns in each other's newspapers, pulpit exchanges in each other's churches and synagogues, Black-Jewish pairs speaking in the schools, Jewish intellectuals promoting books by and about African-Americans, career internships for Black students. They expect us to work together monitoring police prejudice, hate crimes, media distortions, vandalism, harassment. They want Jews to "interrupt" racism whenever we see or hear it. And they want financial support for Black self-reliance projects-they want white resources put into programs that African-Americans control.

African-Americans may not realize it, but what they are asking Jews to do, in my opinion, is to act Jewish. How we each practice religious Judaism is a private matter, but the practice of moral Judaism is something I believe most Jews must express publicly through our commitments.

To be morally Jewish required doing tzadekah (the Hebrew word meaning charity, caring and "right action," whose linguistic root, tzadek, means justice) and gemilut hesed (acts of lovingkindness). These are actions, not just talk. The pursuit of justice is one definition of activism. It is also, as I've said, what makes and keeps us Jews. If we lose our purpose, we lose our peoplehood and become no more than an odd collection of folks with common ancestors, unique religious laws and an uncanny potential for victimization. That's not Jewish enough for me.