

TEXT PANELS

Bridges and Boundaries Revisited: African Americans and American Jews

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of African Americans and American Jews challenges us to contemplate some of our most enduring dilemmas. How can ethnic and racial groups successfully interact and share power? How can we better reach across the boundaries of a divided America and speak to one another? How do we build bridges to expand our democracy?

In recent years, media reports have focused on tensions between African Americans and Jews and raised questions about the ability of each to understand the other. Indeed, the two groups' collective histories have been distinct and divergent. African Americans, despite many individual successes, have a history dominated by racism and discrimination. Jews, despite the formidable barrier of anti-Semitism, have seen gradual success and acceptance into the mainstream.

Despite differences, African Americans and Jews have often collaborated in the effort to create a more just and inclusive society. Yet, while many Jews look back on a perceived "grand alliance" between Blacks and Jews, many African Americans see no such significance in the relationship. Is one perception correct? Can the two be reconciled?

As this exhibition suggests, the interactions between African Americans and Jewish Americans have been marked by both cooperation and tension. Collectively, they tell an inspiring story of struggle, triumph, and respect, as well as a more complicated narrative of inequality, mistrust, and resentment. This history challenges all Americans to confront racism and anti-Semitism, create alliances, and build bridges across boundaries in a nation of diverse people.

II. OUT OF BONDAGE

Tales of Exodus and liberation from bondage echo through the centuries in the histories and memories of both African Americans and American Jews. Although the enslavement of Africans in America and of the Egyptian captivity of the Israelites cannot be simply equated, they have shaped and molded collective identities. In the cultures of both groups, through sacred writings and freedom songs, in literature and art, the themes of enslavement and deliverance appear again and again.

A. UNWILLING AMERICANS

Africans arrived in America as enslaved people. Between 1619 and 1807, close to 20 million were forcibly brought to the shores of North America, packed into ships like cargo for the long and sometimes deadly journey to the New World. From the coasts and hinterlands of West and Central Africa, slaves came speaking different languages, with different cultural and religious traditions; yet they forged a community in America out of the brutal degradation of slavery.

With the demise of slavery in the 19th century, African Americans faced a new system of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and legal segregation that excluded them from high-paying jobs, public facilities, and basic claims to citizenship. They nonetheless challenged this system of racial domination with relentless agitation for civil rights and social justice, and by moving in search of new possibilities. Between 1910 and 1930, nearly a million left the South seeking better economic opportunities. This "Great Migration" brought large numbers of African Americans and American Jews together in the urban centers of the industrial North and Midwest.

B. EXODUS

European Jews came to America as immigrants and refugees. Deprived of a single homeland, they had wandered from place to place for centuries. Jews were forcibly expelled from England in the 12th century, from Spain at the time Columbus reached the New World, and from German territory in the 17th century. Many migrated to Eastern Europe, where in the 18th century they were confined to an area called the Pale of Settlement, prohibited from owning land, excluded from certain occupations, and subjected to systematic violence.

In North America, a small Jewish community dating from colonial times was enlarged, during the mid-19th century, by an influx of German Jews. Then, between 1870 and 1914, some 2 million Eastern European Jews emigrated to the United States in search of safe haven and economic opportunity. Many of the new arrivals experienced exclusion and discrimination reminiscent of the lands they had fled, while others found enormous opportunities. Some brought radical and progressive social views that led them to identify with the plight of African Americans.

C. SPIRITUAL AFFINITIES

We can identify with the whole concept of freedom, liberation and justice, which is at the heart of the Black church and the Jewish religion.

—Congressman John Lewis, 1988

African-American Christianity was shaped by African religious traditions, by the experience of slavery, and by its biblical foundation, which included Jewish sacred writings. Tales of the Israelites spoke vividly to the plight of the slaves in America. To many African Americans, the Exodus story and its tale of bondage, flight, and deliverance offered hope amid the darkness of slavery.

For American Jews, the biblical experience of slavery, coupled with centuries of persecution, were integral to their identity. For some, the civil rights struggles of African Americans gave contemporary meaning to the words of the Hebrew prophets and became intertwined with the Passover story, inspiring a renewed commitment to the traditional values of Judaism, which embraced social action.

III. RACIALIZED BODIES: IMAGING THE OTHER

Beginning in the 19th century and continuing into the present, racial science has sought to demarcate, delineate, and define individuals through their physical characteristics. Self-appointed experts have ascribed cultural meaning to a range of physical differences, from the shape of a nose to the color of skin or texture of hair. Many became preoccupied with quantifying racial difference, especially through measurement of the skull (phrenology) and studies of the body (physiognomy).

At various times, both Blacks and Jews have been defined as separate "races," cast as "other," and made objects of scientific study. Charles Darwin cautioned in *Descent of Man* (1871) that races "graduate into each other, and that it is hardly possible to discover clear distinctive characters between them." Ironically, contemporaries largely ignored his conclusion that racial differences were not of great evolutionary import. So-called Social Darwinists tried to identify evolutionary distinctions among humans to justify social inequality as a product of nature. Recently, artists have drawn on the iconography of scientific racism to reclaim histories and images of difference.

IV. A CALL TO ACTION: The Teens and Twenties

The few who dare must speak and speak again, to right the wrong of the many.

—W.E.B. DuBois, 1908

Racism and anti-Semitism drew African Americans and American Jews together as sometimes reluctant allies in the fight against discrimination. Violence created another disturbing commonality. Urban race riots in the United States in 1906, 1908, and 1917 bore unmistakable similarities to pogroms in Russia during the same period. In the 1920s, a resurgent Ku Klux Klan directed its wrath against immigrants and Jews, as well as African Americans, defining a common cause.

In a cooperative effort, some members of the African-American "Talented Tenth," aided by wealthy German Jews and others who envisioned a just, multiracial society, established important civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, 1909). At the same time, Jewish leaders formed the American Jewish Committee (AJC, 1911) to combat anti-Semitism. Yet even as the struggle for social justice brought the two groups together, antagonisms centering on the issues of class, race, and differences in access to power threatened the stability of the coalition.

A. ANTI-LYNCHING ART

In early 1935, the NAACP and the Communist Party-USA each held art exhibitions on the subject of lynching. While both the NAACP and the CP-USA had memberships composed of African Americans and American Jews—albeit in significantly different proportions—these organizations disagreed about the best means of achieving racial and economic justice. Both exhibitions, however, condemned lynching, raised public awareness of racial violence, and sought to gain support for anti-lynching legislation. In the NAACP exhibition, African-American artists were most numerous. In the CP-USA exhibition, Jewish artists were in the majority. Several of the works included here were among those exhibited in these shows.

B. TO AFRICA AND ISRAEL

DIASPORA—to scatter; people who have been dispersed; people outside of their homeland.

The search for a homeland has characterized both African American and American Jewish political concerns during the 20th century. Beginning in the early decades of the century, Black nationalists and Jewish Zionists urged the reclamation of ancestral homelands for their peoples. The modern Zionist movement, founded by Hungarian writer Theodor Herzl in the late 19th century, emphasized the establishment of a Jewish national state. At the same time, Marcus Garvey and other Black nationalists sought to liberate the African continent from colonialism and reclaim it for Africans in diaspora. The quests to preserve Africa for Africans and Israel for Jews remain powerful vehicles for cultural identity and pride.

V. FELLOW TRAVELLERS: The Thirties and Forties

During the Great Depression, many American workers believed that capitalism had failed them. They turned to other political models, including Marxism. Eastern European Jews had a history of involvement in revolutionary movements in Russia and Poland and were active in Communist, Socialist, and other radical organizations in the United States, often in leadership positions. Worker solidarity across racial lines, which was a central objective of these organizations, had an obvious appeal to African Americans.

The Communist Party attracted members through its highly visible defense of defendants in the 1931 Scottsboro case, which involved nine African-American men wrongfully accused of raping two white women in Alabama. The Communist Party's legal arm, the International Labor Defense (ILD), provided attorneys for the men, as they did in many civil rights cases. The Scottsboro case and ILD support throughout the long appeals process became a rallying point for African Americans, even the large number who did not join the Communist Party.

VI. FIGHTING INJUSTICE ABROAD AND AT HOME: World War II

During World War II, thousands of African Americans were sent abroad to fight for their country only to find, when they returned home, that they were still denied basic rights of citizenship. African Americans again demanded that the nation safeguard their freedom, a demand that grew into the Civil Rights movement. Some progressive American Jews became involved in the struggle during the 1950s and 1960s, many making connections to the racism that had led to Nazi atrocities in Europe. Many African Americans were also moved by the Nazi atrocities and spoke strongly against the dangers of fascism.

VII. THE GRAND ALLIANCE?: The Fifties and Sixties

Veteran activists often refer to the 1950s and 1960s—the period of the Civil Rights movement—as the era of a "grand alliance" of African Americans and American Jews. Many Northern white liberals and radicals, a disproportionate number of them Jews, joined with African Americans in seeking an end to segregation and other forms of racial injustice in the South. The interaction between the two groups, hammered out in courtrooms, on freedom rides, and in many Civil Rights activities in Southern communities, reflected a spirit of cooperation and camaraderie. Some Blacks and Jews envisioned a new society devoted to interracial harmony.

Challenging this fragile kinship, however, were mounting tensions over the involvement of Civil Rights activists who were not of African ancestry. Southern-born Black leaders sought to maintain control over what was, in fact, their movement. Remembering earlier interactions with white activists, some feared that white involvement would result in white control. Moreover, as the focus of the movement shifted from the South to address long-standing racial inequalities in the North, some white progressives ceased their involvement. Whereas the movement had originally fought for basic constitutional and human rights, such as ending segregated facilities, by the late 1960s it focused on a radical restructuring of American society and the redistribution of economic and political power.

A. FREEDOM SUMMER

The goal of Freedom Summer, according to its organizer, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was to "obtain the right of all citizens of Mississippi to vote, using as many people as necessary to obtain that end." Who should register these African American voters was hotly debated among SNCC members. Some questioned the value of white volunteers in a project specifically aimed at rural Blacks. Despite these concerns, northern college students, both Black and white, were recruited early in 1964. Andrew Goodman of Queens College was among them. After a training period, he joined seasoned Civil Rights workers James Chaney and Michael Schwerner, both members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), in Neshoba County, Mississippi. The murders of these three men in June 1964 drew outrage and national attention to the racial tyranny that had long prevailed in Mississippi.

VIII. THE WAKE OF THE SIXTIES

By 1970, African Americans and American Jews faced one another across a widening chasm. Jews, on the whole, experienced continued economic success, whereas large numbers of African Americans faced economic stagnation or worse. While most African Americans remained in urban neighborhoods, many Jews "fled" with other whites to the suburbs. Blacks and Jews encountered one another less frequently.

As the triumphs of the Civil Rights coalition appeared to fade and the politics of divisiveness and self-interest took hold, African Americans and Jewish Americans became increasingly estranged. The concern of many Jews for their brethren in Israel, and the support of some African Americans for liberation movements in the Middle East, widened the chasm. From affirmative action to the Middle East, Farrakhan to Crown Heights, most Blacks and Jews in the United States have found themselves on opposite sides of a widening political and economic divide. At the same time, some progressive African Americans and American Jews have continued to work together on issues of shared concern.

IX. CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Do African Americans and American Jews have a "special relationship"? A shared history of discrimination, oppression, and enslavement? A common commitment to justice? Putting the past aside, can they continue the conversation and build a new future? An examination of the long history of interaction between people in both communities provides a needed forum for the exchange of ideas. More than that, understanding the past can help African Americans and American Jews deal with each other more productively in the present and redirect their energies to the unsolved social and economic issues still challenging our society.