

Blacks And Jews In America: A Canadian's View

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The growing evidence of antisemitism in the Black community has been a cause for concern.



Jewish students at Xavier University showed support for Black Lives Matter movement in June | Photo: Xavier University Facebook page

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Some of the most fervent followers of Jesus in America today are Black Americans. Many have an intimate relationship with the writings in the Hebrew Bible. Many draw their inspiration from the calls for freedom and justice contained in those writings. For them, the question of skin colour or ethnic background do not arise in these because the messages are universal.

If we think somewhat more deeply on the matter, Jesus' people, at the time he preached, the people for whom he sought redemption, were likewise people of colour. That the skin of Jews dispersed in Europe has been washed white by centuries of intermarriage and rape, does

not change the reality of their origins. (Jewish rules of belonging were changed by the Rabbis in the diaspora from patrilineal to matrilineal because rape was so often visited upon Jewish women that one could not easily ascribe Jewish fatherhood to children born in the diaspora.)

The skin colour of Jews from Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Ethiopia, and India, proclaim the truth. Many Arabs in the Middle East give witness to their forced conversion from Judaism in their DNA. Like their fellow Semites in Arab countries, in spite of how Blacks feel, Jews are inherently a people of colour.

In pre-Civil War days, Jews in the southern U.S. had their institutions fire-bombed when Jewish philanthropists and some Rabbis spoke up and supported efforts to correct the worst excesses of the slavery economy. Most southern Jews kept silent in the face of private and public intimidation but Jewish activism was unrelenting in the North in support of the elimination of slavery.

There are numerous anecdotal reports of American Jews reaching out to individuals in the Black community, over the decades, with the object of improving their situations. We know that Louie Armstrong wore a Star of David until the day he died, in commemoration of what the intervention of a Jewish family meant to him in his life. He was not alone. Yet today there is evidence of common cause by American Blacks with those whose histories go back to African slavery, and who indeed have an association with those who currently practice slavery in some countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

In the fifties, under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Black activism led to some legislative progress. King was quoted as recounting that ninety percent of the civil rights lawyers in Mississippi were Jewish. The discovery of the bodies of three young Freedom Riders, murdered by the Ku Klux Klan, two of them Jewish, was thought to have led to the accelerated passage of the Voting Rights Bill of 1965. Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, The American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee, were active in the courts and in the court of public opinion, with money and people. Almost every synagogue had its civil rights committee.

Jews as individuals were so active in these civil rights initiatives that there was a negative reaction in the Black community. It was argued by some that leadership of the movement should be developed and be centered in Black hands alone. Indeed, some Jews were expelled from leadership positions. Some leaders of the Black Power movement insisted that Jewish activism on behalf of American Blacks was impeding Black development, and the struggle should be advanced solely by Blacks themselves.

The rising economic status of the Jewish community as a whole, and the invidious comparison with Black advancement, led to hostile attitudes toward Jews. The establishment of the Jewish state, and its military successes, led to public support by some Blacks for the

Palestinians as the underdog “people of colour”, being aggressed against by a “European” power. Despite this idea being rejected by Martin Luther King Jr., these attitudes linger.

Significant support by American Whites for the Black Lives Matter movement has swelled the ranks of those insisting that America must confront systemic racism. But for American Jews who have been there all along the way, the growing evidence of antisemitism in the Black community has been a cause for concern.



Martin Luther King is flanked by Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath carrying a Sefer Torah, and beside them a flag-waving rabbi from Princeton, NJ, Everett Gendler | Photo: TempleIsrael.com

The open racism of the Nation of Islam is on record. Polls have shown higher levels of antisemitic ideas in the Black community than in the general population. The historical sympathy of Jews for the disadvantaged, and their support for the efforts of American Blacks to achieve equal rights in the face of systemic racism, is undiminished. The concept of justice inherent in Jewish values demands it. But some of the attitudes toward Jews and Israel expressed by some in the Black Lives Matter movement are worrying.

When Jewish immigrants made their way to America they faced discrimination just like most groups newly arrived in the New World. Limitations on the kind of work they could do, or the occupations they could undertake, steered them into activities others were less willing to undertake. Many ventured into small commercial enterprises which brought them into contacts with Black Americans that others would not undertake. Don't we often resent those we pay rent to, those from whom we buy our necessities from strained resources?

As they prospered, Jews became more accepted in American society as “honorary Protestants” by their fellows. That advancement in American society, both economically and socially, was withheld from American Blacks. Some natural class antipathy was bound to arise, and did, and is still a feature of Black American attitudes to Jews. Why should Jews

have succeeded in this way, and not Blacks, some ask? Some American Blacks see Jews as part of the unjust White overlordship that they say has held Blacks back from gaining their rightful access to the American dream.



NBA legend and community leader Kareem Abdul-Jabbar says recent Antisemitism from celebrities 'Troubling Omen' for the future of Black Lives Matter | Photo: Cold Spring Harbour Laboratory

The struggle of American Blacks to achieve their piece of that, frustrated despite the U.S. Constitution, The U.S. Civil War, and more recent civil rights legislation, has been bloody and discouraging.

It's not merely ironic for American Jews to discover today that elements of the Black American community are in league with those who are working against Jewish interests and are seeking to uproot the Jewish state, the sole haven in the world for displaced Jewry. Centuries of discrimination, and experiences of wholesale slaughter without any place to turn for relief, underscore the importance of Israel to Jews. After a history in America wherein Jews have expended untold blood and treasure to achieve justice for Black Americans, growing hostility towards Israel and Zionists appears to be the reward.

With Mitch McConnell and his ilk on one side and Louis Farrakhan and his new recruits on the other, the brave new world American Jews are fighting for does not appear to be a bright one for them.

Martin Luther King Jr., American Jews need you! Damned if you do, and damned if you don't!



Max Roytenberg is an author, poet and blogger, with many published articles in Jewish periodicals in Dublin, New York, Winnipeg and Vancouver. After a career as an Economist and Executive in the Food Industry, in Canada and abroad, he writes, and lives with his Bride, in Vancouver. He has children and grandchildren in the US, Canada, China and Israel. His last book, “Hero In My Own Eyes”, is available through major booksellers and on Amazon.