

The Elusive Alliance

by Jonathan D. Sarna

Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States edited by Jack Salzman and Cornel West

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In a celebrated article in 1993 in the *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, historians John Bracey and August Meier declared, "The comparison and interaction of blacks and Jews in the history of the United States together form a significant and interesting field that has yet to be explored in a

systematic way." They threw down a series of questions designed to "stimulate thinking among historians, and [to] provide a useful agenda for future research."

Four years later, we have a tentative response in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, co-edited by Jack Salzman, who curated the Jewish Museum's exhibit "Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews," and Cornel West, the distinguished Harvard professor. Salzman admits that the

full-scale history of that fascinating relationship "still has not been written." Four of the 21 essays in this multi-authored volume are basically personal ruminations, while four others focus on contemporary "hot-button" issues like affirmative action and nationalism rather than on learning from the past. The best essays, though, do fill important gaps in our understanding of the history of black-Jewish relations.

The volume begins where black-Jewish relations began—

in rabbinic exegesis of the Bible. Thirty years ago in his award-winning *White Over Black*, Winthrop Jordan contended that it was "a specifically Jewish rather than a Christian" interpretation of Genesis 9:25 that rooted the origins of blackness in "the curse of Ham." Scholars have echoed him ever since, blaming "Judaic tradition" for what St. Claire Drake called "the genesis of cultural and phenotype denigration of dark-skinned peoples." The Nation of Islam, in its *Blacks & Jews Newsletter*, translates this into the incendiary claim that there was a "Jewish conspiracy in the Biblical origin of White supremacy," which it sees as "the absolute basis" for the "choice of dark-skinned Africans for chattel slavery."

The problem, as David M. Goldenberg demonstrates in his contribution, is that neither Jordan nor any of the scholars who followed him could read rabbinic texts in the original. His own expert reading discloses, if anything, "a positive perception of blacks running throughout the rabbinic corpus." Drawing in part on his examples (some previously unavailable in English), Benjamin Braude has brilliantly shown elsewhere the elasticity of the medieval uses of Ham imagery, which even included a Christian theory that depicted Jews as Ham's true descendants. Braude finds that the association of the Hamitic curse with blackness and the use of this biblical passage to legitimate black slavery began only in the modern period, not more than 400 years ago. His conclusion is well worth pondering: The children of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japhet—"have been ever-changing projections of the likes and dislikes, hatreds and

loves, prejudices and fears, needs and rationales through which society continually constructs and reconstructs its selves and its opposites."

After briefly touching on the Middle Ages, *Struggles in the Promised Land* moves on to the well-worn controversy over Jews and the slave trade. David Brion Davis, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, easily dismisses as malicious fantasy claims of a significant Jewish presence: "In actuality, the free people of color in the Caribbean greatly surpassed the much smaller number of Jews in slave ownership." Seymour Drescher has concluded elsewhere that the Jewish presence in the four most substantial slave trades "ranged from marginal to virtually nil." And in an exhaustively-researched forthcoming book, Eli Faber shows that Jews comprised fewer than 2 percent of those involved in the slave trade.

To be sure, Jews did greatly benefit from slavery's wormy fruits, just as non-Jews did. And as Davis reminds us in a slew of books, much of modern progress was constructed upon the backs of black slaves. The "dismal truth," he says, is "that the New World...was made possible only...by the dehumanizing subjugation of the so-called African race."

Struggles in the Promised Land adds little to our understanding of black-Jewish relations prior to mass East European Jewish immigration in the 1880s. Jews scarcely exceeded one-half of one percent of the American population at any time during that period, and most of the scholarship that exists—summarized in part here by historian Jason Silverman—suggests that they did not differ much from their Gentile neighbors: They were rich and poor,

held diverse views about slavery and fought on both sides of the Civil War. Just barely inside "the groove of history," Jews were "inconsequential at best and invisible at worst."

A closer look, however, suggests that at least four central themes of black-Jewish relations have their roots in this period. First of all, Jews both achieved legal equality in the United States and became firmly identified with the white race. Back in colonial New Amsterdam, Jews briefly enjoyed fewer rights than free blacks (such as the rights to own real estate or join the militia), but the status of Jews rose over time, dramatically so after the Revolution. This was particularly true in Charleston, the largest of America's Jewish communities during the immediate post-Revolutionary decades, where Jews won close to full acceptance into white society. With 60 percent of Charleston's residents consisting of black slaves and free persons of color, the ruling minority population of whites was happy to embrace Jews as racial allies. In return, in 1820 Jews boosted the city's total white population by more than 5 percent. Being linked to the white race brought American Jews an unprecedented degree of freedom and happiness throughout the South—and beyond. These benefits derived, at least in part, from black subjugation. In antebellum America as earlier in the Caribbean, the irony that David Brion Davis first noted continued to hold true: "Jews found the threshold of liberation in a region dependent on black slavery."

Second, the pre-Civil War decades witnessed the first significant black-Jewish clash that turned on the distinctiveness of the Jewish experience—the expectation that Jews would

evince special sympathy for black people's plight. In response to the pro-Southern, anti-black and anti-abolitionist bombast of the Jewish journalist and politician Mordecai M. Noah, *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in America, tried to evoke from him "a fellow feeling" for slaves, suggesting that a Jew should learn from history to "sympathize with the oppressed of every hue." Even if Jews had finally achieved full acceptance, black critics implied, history held them to a higher standard. Much of the subsequent relationship between America's blacks and Jews has revolved around this same presumption. From the beginning, African Americans expected more understanding from Jews and expressed disappointment if they did not receive it.

Third, the mid-19th century witnessed the first known American examples of black people who were practicing Jews. Ralph Melnick has recounted the remarkable story of Billy Simons (1780?-1859), an enslaved newspaper carrier for *The Charleston Courier*, who claimed Jewish ancestry, received the extraordinary right to sit "in the nave of the temple among his white coreligionists" and was described by Charleston's Rabbi Maurice Mayer as "the most observant of those who go to the synagogue." New York's venerable Congregation Shearith Israel likewise knew black worshippers at that time. "When New York State abolished slavery [in 1799], they chose to remain with their now endeared masters, and assumed their religion," an 1853 German-Jewish visitor to the synagogue was informed. The African Americans, all females, reputedly prayed "with true devotion." Scholars have largely ignored the experiences of black

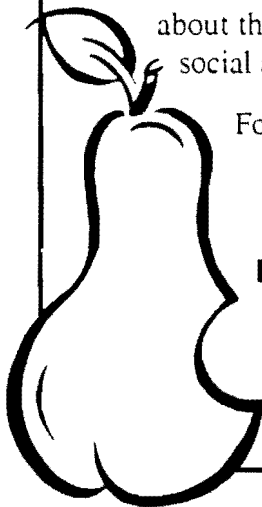
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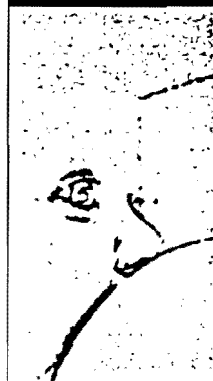
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Jews, past and present, although some today estimate that the number of those Jews stands as high as 200,000. Their history, particularly the troubled relationship between black Jews and white Jews, cries out for analysis.

Finally, any serious effort to understand the early history of black-Jewish relations must confront the troubled legacy of Reconstruction, yet another glaring gap that *Struggles in the Promised Land* proves unable to fill. As early as 1899, Mark Twain, in his essay, "Concerning the Jews," linked the legacy of Reconstruction and the rising tide of anti-Semitism in his own time: "In the cotton states, after the war, the simple and ignorant negroes made the crops for the white planter on shares. The Jew came down in force, set up shop on the plantation, supplied all the negro's wants on credit, and at the end of the season was proprietor of the negro's share of the present crop and of part of his share of the next one. Before long the whites detested Jews, and it is doubtful if the negro loved him."

The truth of this and similar accounts is difficult to gauge in the absence of serious scholarship, but contemporaries were apparently persuaded. The moral ambiguities hinted at by Mark Twain underlay the history of black-Jewish relations forever afterwards: Should Reconstruction-era Jews be reviled as Shylocks or praised for extending credit to those whom nobody else would trust? Did Jews by moving south block economic progress for blacks or did they assist them by filling a critical economic void? In extending credit to freed slaves, were Jews operating from altruistic motives or self-interested ones—and does it really matter? In sum, does this episode bespeak Jewish

righteousness, Jewish rapaciousness, the victimization of both Jews and blacks by wealthy white landowners, or simply the operations of a capitalist system that distributes rewards unequally? These recurring questions admit of no easy answers.

Struggles in the Promised Land stands on firmer ground when it turns to the 20th century, the subject of its best essays. Here considerable new historical research has been accomplished, and the editors

make the most of it. No summary can do justice to all these essays, and inevitably their quality is uneven. What links a number of them together is their focus on the "special relationship" between blacks and Jews: what it consisted of and why it foundered. At least five different answers to this crucial question are provided here, none

of them wholly satisfactory. Historian Hasia Diner blames what happened on the "long-standing discrepancy between the way blacks and Jews 'saw' each other on a metaphoric level and the ways they 'saw' each other in the flesh." By examining the mythic images

that Jews and blacks constructed of each other and comparing these to the encounters that actually took place between blacks and Jews—encounters, she admits, that we still know all too little about—she concludes that ultimately "the gap between rhetoric and reality proved to be too great. Every day Jews and blacks who looked into each others eyes could never see each other as ordinary and real."

Reporter Jonathan Kaufman, by contrast, argues that what

went wrong can be located with some precision in America's northern cities. For decades, Jews and blacks had closely interacted in these cities—as landlord and tenant, storekeeper and shopper, schoolteacher and parent. But in the mid-1960s, when the civil rights struggle moved up from the South, painful

urban confrontations took place that pitted the interests of blacks and Jews against one another. These, he argues, drove Jews by the thousands out of America's cities, and enraged the mass of rank and file Jews whose businesses were gutted and old neighborhoods

ravaged by violence and crime. Today, as a result, most Jews have abandoned America's cities and "like most whites moved to the suburbs." With Jews and blacks no longer sharing a common urban space, the territorial basis of their "special relationship," he believes, has effectively ended.

Historian Nancy Weiss roots the black-Jewish relationship in "a particular subset of the American Jewish community" that operated in the early decades of the twentieth century. She focuses upon wealthy, religiously liberal and socially active Jews (Our Crowd) of German or Austrian background who generally resided in the most fashionable sections of New York. A "complex interplay" of altruism, religious belief, social concern and pragmatic self-interest motivated their concern for racial justice, she shows. She finds striking parallels between Jews' assistance to blacks emigrating from the South and to fellow Jews immigrating from Eastern Europe. Most importantly, she demonstrates, in greater detail than anyone has before, just how large this small cadre of early 20th-century Jews loomed in the financial, legal, political and administrative work of the NAACP and of the National Urban League. Refuting those like David Levering Lewis who have sought to minimize the early Jewish contribution to civil rights, she concludes that it was, if anything, even more "unusual in its character and intensity" than previously recognized. As for what went wrong, she argues, in part, that Jewish contributions sometimes carried with them problems of ownership and control as individual Jews sought to use their power of the purse to influence black organizational policies. One might add, of course, that

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a new generation of Jewish and black leaders were emerging who understood the demands of leadership differently than their predecessors had and proved both less paternalistic and more representative.

Historian Cheryl Greenberg suggests yet a fourth explanation for "what went wrong." Examining the relations between black and Jewish communal agencies devoted to civil rights, she finds that as early as World War II "collaboration emerged primarily out of clear and explicit self-interest, albeit a self-interest that coincided with a broader moral stance." Where both groups expected to benefit, cooperation flourished. Where self-interest was less clear-cut, agencies held back. Since anti-Semitism declined far more quickly than racism, strategies slowly diverged. Moreover, records of the time

disclose that the "special relationship" so warmly recalled in (deceptive) retrospect was, even at its height, more troubled on both sides than is generally understood. By the 1960s, Greenberg argues, "the most basic visions of the two communities conflicted." The angry subsequent debate over affirmative action—"the logical culmination of years of slow divergence of interest, vision, and priority"—sounded what may have been the relationship's death knell. The more "Jewish and black interests and concerns diverged," she concludes, the more "their level of collaboration declined."

Finally, Clayborne Carson argues that it was not so much self-interest as "universalistic values and cosmopolitan perspectives" that drew blacks and Jews together from 1954 to 1965. Civil rights activism, he

finds, "was most often rooted in leftist political backgrounds rather than in religious beliefs" and was also "more common among secular Jews than among observant Jews." What went wrong, he believes, was that both Jews and blacks shifted away "from the universalistic values that had once prevailed in the civil rights movement" and moved toward "an emphasis on political action based on more narrowly conceived group identities and interests." Lamenting (as Paul Buhle and Robin D. G. Kelley also do in this volume) the steep decline in "popular support for socialism and other forms of radicalism that transcended racial, ethnic and religious boundaries," he charges that both Jews and blacks now began to pursue divisive "identity politics." This political and cultural change, he concludes,

is what has undermined support for multicultural and multiracial democracy in America and divided both blacks and Jews among themselves.

Reading these different interpretations of the black-Jewish alliance and its demise reminds us of how complex the history of black-Jewish relations has been, and how little we really understand it. It is a history of images and of interactions, leaders and followers, cities and suburbs, agencies and interests, ideologies and identities. Rooted in the past, it is a history that both shapes the present and has been profoundly shaped by it. ■

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