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**Julius Lester**

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## **BLACKS, JEWS, AND FARRAKHAN**

**I**t is troubling that so many listen to Farrakhan. If no one listens his becomes a voice in the wilderness. But listening transforms monologue into relationship. Farrakhan's audiences are predominantly black, but blacks are not his only listeners. Jews listen, too, and with an almost compulsive fascination, making it unclear which group has the more intimate relationship with Farrakhan.

Relationships offer confirmation of identity and affirmation of self. Farrakhan confirms and affirms identity for both blacks *and* Jews. Because he does, blacks and Jews are mesmerized by what are, in essence, nothing more than a combination of simplistic nationalist ravings, angry harangues, crude anti-Semitic diatribes, and historical ignorance. (I use "Farrakhan" here to refer not only to the individual, but also other purveyors of black anti-Semitism.)

Before exploring what Farrakhan confirms for blacks and Jews, two illusory ideas must be addressed: first, that the black anti-Semitism of the past two decades is new, and second, that blacks and Jews share a common oppression.

The black-Jewish coalition of the civil rights era is put forward as the shining paradigm of what was and what could be again "if only. . . ." As significant as that alliance was, it never represented the *only* relationship between blacks and Jews. The black-Jewish coalition was between the elites of both peoples.

At the grass roots level, however, there was never an alliance. Black anti-Semitism has deep roots, as shown in the following tale from Zora Neale Hurston's introduction to her classic collection *Mules and Men*.

When God created people, He didn't give them their souls. God knew that the soul was very powerful and he wanted to wait until people were strong enough to hold their souls in their bodies. God kept the soul beneath the skirts of his garment and one day, a white man walked past God and just as he did, a little breeze lifted up the hem of God's skirt and some light from the soul streamed out and it was so bright that the white man got scared and ran away. Next day, a black man was walking past God and he got curious about the soul, so he went over and tried to peek under God's skirt and the light and warmth from the soul was so powerful that it knocked him over and he ran away. A few days later, along came the Jew. He was walking past God when a big wind came and lifted up God's skirt. The Jew saw the soul gleaming brightly and streaming with lights of many colors and he ran and grabbed the soul. Well, the soul was so powerful that it knocked the Jew down and rolled him over and over on the ground. But the Jew wouldn't let go. That soul knocked him up in the sky and back down on the ground, but the Jew still wouldn't let go. The Jew hugged the soul so hard that it broke into a lot of little pieces. The white man and the black man came and picked up the little pieces and put them inside and that's how man got his soul. But one of these days, God is going to make the Jew divide that soul up fair so everybody gets equal amounts.

The tale is a black folk response to the concept of Jews as the Chosen People. Just as Christians and Muslims asserted their election to supplant Jews and be God's *new* chosen people, so today Louis Farrakhan:

This I want the Jews to know and we want the world to know: that they are not the chosen people of God. . . .

The Holy Koran charges the Jews with taking the message of God and altering that message and giving the people a book written by their own

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hands, saying that the book is from God . . . the Jews . . . fed a corrupted light through this book and were the fathers of false religions and false religious practices. They cannot be considered the friend of God, doing such evil.

I am not anti-Jew. I am pro-truth, but in this serious hour, the truth must be told so that the true people of God may come up into view of the entire world. These that have stolen our identity, these that have dressed themselves up in our garments must be defrocked today, that the world may see who are the true chosen people of Almighty God. (*New York Times*, June 29, 1984)

Farrakhan's agenda is not only political; it is theological (questions of identity often are). That is why statements condemning Farrakhan have not only been ineffective but have increased his credibility among blacks.

Moral appeals are effective only when speaker and listener belong to the same "moral community," Laurence Thomas notes in his important new book, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust*. Thomas observes that "the moral expectations . . . people have of both themselves and others . . . are generally tied to the consensus of the moral community in which they live and with which they identify."

The black-Jewish coalition of the civil rights era succeeded because blacks and Jews shared a vision of a moral community in which racial integration and equal opportunity were agreed on as the central values and goals. The extent to which blacks and Jews reside in the same moral universe is questionable nowadays. Black-Jewish conflicts are mesmerizing, because they are not as much about blacks and Jews as they are about struggles between radically different moral communities for possession of God's soul.

At one time blacks and Jews were perceived to be denizens of the same moral community, allies and compatriots in the land of oppression. In her seminal work, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935*, Haisa Diner found striking illustrations of the American Jewish identification with blacks in the Jewish press. For instance we read in the Yiddish language *Forward*, July 1917:

The situation of the Negroes in America is very comparable to the situation of the Jews . . . in Russia. The Negro diaspora, the special laws, the decrees, the pogroms and also the Negro complaints, the Negro hopes are very similar to those which we Jews . . . lived through.

Jews saw themselves especially suited to be advocates for blacks. "Many of us were oppressed in Old Russia as the Negroes in free America. We can understand them better and therefore we sound their appeal wide quickly." (*Forward*, June 4, 1930.)

It is remarkable that Jews did not opt automatically for assimilation in the face of anti-Semitism in the dominant society but chose instead to empathize with and act on behalf of the oppressed. The integrity of Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement should not be questioned or denied. That the motivation for that involvement was not as pure as some today would like to think does not mean it was Machiavellian, either. The motivations were complex, combining genuine empathy and self-interest, which also characterized the motivation of the blacks in the alliance.

Jews also felt a "real bitterness" about American anti-Semitism, Diner writes, but were "afraid to vent the full extent of their anxiety" directly. They expressed it, in part, "through the problems of blacks." Jews also saw themselves as "cultural bridges between the white and black worlds because they understood both." As whites, they could move more easily in the wider society, but as members of an oppressed group, they understood blacks. "Because of that empathy, *the black experience had become extremely personal to Jews.*" (My emphasis.)

An essential element of secular and liberal religious Jewish identity became bound to blacks. Jews had taken blacks into the nexus of their emotions, never dreaming that blacks had not done the same. "'Being good' to blacks," writes Diner, "dealing sensitively and sympathetically with them was perceived as a natural outgrowth of the Jewish tradition, and as ethnic group leaders they had a real stake in the preservation of that tradition. They believed that their efforts and concerns for American

blacks set Jews apart from other Americans, apart from Christians. This became, in effect, *the American version of the "Chosen People" notion, the American adoption of the message from Mount Sinai.*" (My emphasis.)

For blacks, on the other hand, anti-Semitism expresses a deep resentment at the Jewish presumption of shared oppression. What was true to some extent in the early decades of this century is not true at century's close. Today blacks see Jews as white because in a white society, white skin is an advantage, even if you're a Jew.

Jewish success, however, cannot be attributed only to skin color, or education and hard work, as Farrakhan astutely pointed out last fall in a speech at California State University at Northridge: ". . . success is not a mystery; success is not by chance . . . when you find a synagogue, next to it you find a shul. What is going on in there? . . . They're teaching their people from the tradition. The school is teaching them the history of themselves and their culture, so that no matter where Jews go, they remain intact. Jews know who they are, they know their origin in the world, they know their history. But the black has been deprived of such knowledge. . . ." (*Boston Jewish Times*, November 12, 1993)

The black-Jewish alliance was doomed to implode because the specific elements of shared oppression were never as great as the differences. No difference is more profound than Jewish certainty about the Jew's place in history and before God. Regardless of how an individual Jew may feel about being a Jew, the solidity of Jewish history, culture, and religion are incontrovertible. It is the very absence of confidence among African Americans in the solidity of life itself that marks the gulf between blacks and Jews.

Laurence Thomas expands on Orlando Patterson's concept of "natal alienation." This is the condition that results when "the social practices" of a society "forcibly prevent" members of an ethnic group "from fully participating in and thus having a secure knowledge of their historical-cultural traditions," as well as being denied "full membership in the society." The alienation is total

because the group has "neither equality nor their historical-cultural traditions."

**B**lacks of every economic class and educational level respond to Farrakhan because he makes visible the natal alienation all blacks know:

What is the problem? The problem is the fear on the part of those in power of the rise of black men and women to the destiny that Almighty God has called us to. . . . Today in America, the black male is under siege. Today, in America, because of hate, not taught by Farrakhan, but *hate that has been bred into black men and women for self and for their own kind and for their origins in the world. We have been made to hate ourselves, our color, our hair, our features, our origins. So that to destroy one another is to destroy what we hate. So that today black young men are the No. 1 destroyers of self.* . . . (My emphasis.)

Now these black people that are so disrespected by the world, and so disrespectful of self have a divine destiny. You're a wonderful people, destroyed, but even in your destruction, there is a beauty that emanates from you that makes you like the salt of the earth. . . . *You are the only people that don't have a native language that ties you to Africa and your original roots—you ain't got it. Why? How did you lose your tongue? You lost your tongue because you lost your mother. Mother gone, father gone, a motherless child sees what? A hard time. This is what the slave master did. See, what they want to show is Schindler's List. I ain't got no problem with that; I have no problem with that . . . you don't have nobody to tell your story. So don't get angry because Schindler's List is out there. Nobody wants to talk about what happened to black people. And because I said that the holocaust of black people was 100 times worse than the holocaust of Jews, they were angry with me for even comparing this.* . . . (My emphasis.) (*Boston Globe*, March 13, 1994)

Thomas points out that people who suffer from natal alienation are "without a narrative" or "set of narratives that defines values and positive goals and fixes points of historical significance and ennobling rituals that cannot be readily appropriated . . . the narratives of a people define their conception of the good." In other words, the narratives of a people establish

the foundations and norms for their moral community.

Much anti-Semitism among blacks is an expression of envy of the Jewish narrative, and the painful longing for a healing narrative of their own.

Last year, Gerald Early, chair of the African and Afro-American Studies department at Washington University, wrote in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of a trip he took to Israel with a group of blacks. After visiting the Holocaust Memorial of Yad Vashem, the black delegation wondered why blacks had not done more to enshrine the memory of slavery as Jews had the Holocaust. Why was it that blacks lacked museums devoted to their history, and were not as tightly organized as Jews seemed to be? Early answers: "While in Israel I learned this about the black American mind: That *blacks are in awe and jealous of the enormous achievements of Jews* and, as we see it, their privileges: and *we feel inferior to them.*" (My emphasis.)

Neither alliance nor dialogue is possible when one group feels inferior to and shamed by the other, when one group is riven with self-hatred and perceives itself as abandoned, if not wholly rejected by God, while the other knows the pride of accomplishment and has narrative saying it is God's Chosen.

Thomas argues that "the most telling sign of alienation is demonstrated by the black acceptance of Christianity," that is, "the acceptance of the religious traditions of one's oppressor."

Farrakhan speaks to such alienation by fashioning narratives that bestow an African-American tradition in history and an African-American identity before God. Part of that narrative is described by C. Eric Lincoln in his *The Black Muslims in America*:

The true believer who becomes a Muslim casts off at last his old self and takes on a new identity. He changes his name, his religion, his homeland, his moral and cultural values, his very purpose in living. He is no longer a Negro. . . . Now he is a Black Man—divine, ruler of the universe, different in degree only from Allah Himself. . . . His new life is not an easy one: it demands unquestioning faith, unrelenting self-mastery, *unremitting hatred.* (My emphasis.)

Farrakhan's other narrative strategy is devaluation of Jews, which is not mutually exclusive from the one Lincoln describes. If one lacks a narrative that gives a definition of the good, a narrative which at least gives a definition of evil is preferable to no narrative at all.

The Jewish sense of moral community wants blacks to condemn Farrakhan's anti-Semitism, but the black sense of moral community, particularly among the young, needs the moral autonomy that comes when a community chooses its own leader. The power to choose one's own leaders is a greater moral imperative for blacks than repudiating anti-Semitism. To possess one's identity entails the power to make one's own choices, even wrong and despicable ones.

That so many blacks listen to and respond to Farrakhan indicates a frightening nihilism rampant in black America. Farrakhan fills the void with a narrative of anti-Semitism, historical lies, and appeals to black superiority. Only a people desperate to the point of disintegration could take Farrakhan seriously. If Farrakhan's sympathizers were to pause, they would realize that their active and passive support for him creates a climate that permits whites to be as publicly hateful of blacks as Farrakhan is of Jews. Any infatuation with anti-Semitism among blacks can only result in more virile anti-black racism.

**S**till, the black-Jewish conflict is more than a turf war between minorities. Blacks and Jews are merely acting out a dimension of one of the most serious moral crises in the nation's history, a crisis in which the nation finds itself without a sense of moral community and with a weakened narrative. For all the changes wrought during the sixties, none are so with us as these losses. In different ways, the assassinations of John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and most especially, Martin Luther King, Jr., killed the national faith that the good would always prevail. It would not be too much to argue that something of the good in ourselves died when those men were murdered. If the consequence of goodness is assassination, why would anyone, black or white, want

to do ever again what is right and is good? The sense of moral community was further eroded by the decline in the moral authority of the presidency. Lyndon Johnson lied about Vietnam and had to leave office; Richard Nixon tried to cover up a burglary, deceived the American people, and resigned rather than risk impeachment. Succeeding presidents added no luster, and cynical affairs like Irangate only made matters worse.

Politico-religious fundamentalism has arisen in many quarters to fill the moral gap. It cuts across racial, class, and religious boundaries. Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, and Louis Farrakhan have much in common because each sees the world as an Armageddon with the Chosen (themselves and God) on one side and the Rejected (everyone else) on the other. Each offers a narrative of fear and exclusivity posturing as religious righteousness.

Since the day blacks arrived involuntarily on these shores they have confronted the question: where do we fit? That is now the question facing the nation. Where do any of us fit anymore? Farrakhan presents one set of answers, and Jewish attacks on him are not

only ineffective but counterproductive. It is not Farrakhan's speech that should be silenced; rather, we—blacks, Jews, and whites—must be given—must create—something else to listen to, namely a narrative that gives us all an image of the good, the true, and the beautiful, an image in which we can see, not only ourselves as belonging to the good, but each other, too. What might that narrative be? Perhaps it is one some blacks and some Jews and others tried to create in the sixties, a narrative that saw as the good not race, but community, the "beloved community," as it was once called. It is a vision in which the needs of individualism are balanced by those of community, and community is not only that of my race or religion or region but of those who share an inclusive vision of humanity that extends beyond the immediacy of one's personal issues, that eschews the elevation of one's group as the apotheosis of humanity.

Farrakhan offers an ugly and hateful vision. It is no longer sufficient to express disapproval. It is time we offered an alternative. If we do not, we cede moral authority to those who, in their self-hatred, hate us all. □

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THE EDITORS □