

The Image of the Jew in the Negro Community

Jewish-Negro relations — and the responsibility of Jews

By **RABBI PAUL H. LEVENSON**

WE JEWS would imagine that our image in the Negro community was a good one. However, much to their shock, Jewish leaders have discovered that it is not.

We might think: after all, everyone knows the outstanding work done by Jews on behalf of the Negro. Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith have been aggressive in fighting prejudice and intolerance. Formed originally to protect the rights of Jews, these "Jewish Defense Organizations" in large measure are now dedicated to the cause of equal rights for Negroes. We know that many fine Jewish people are active

on Fair Housing Committees, working to gain equal housing opportunities for Negroes. We have a Commissioner on the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination who is a robust and forward-looking champion of the Negro.

We are proud of the fair labor activities of Jews such as Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky and Arthur Goldberg. A man by the name of Jack Greenberg is the chief legal counsel for the NAACP. Scores of Jews have gained national recognition through working for NAACP and other civil rights groups. We have been proud of the large number of Jewish students who participated in the Freedom Rides. How many of you readers have, through small personal acts of courage, chipped away at the walls of anti-Negro prejudice? And, look at Sammy Davis, Jr. Isn't he living proof that Jews and Negroes get along very well, not only with each other but in one and the same person?

RABBI PAUL H. LEVENSON, *Assistant Rabbi at Temple Ohabei Shalom, Brookline, Mass., delivered this sermon at his Temple. The Boston Jewish Advocate reprinted the text May 31. Rabbi Levenson has had articles published in The Negro Digest and the Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform). We believe this sermon deserves consideration and application by Jews throughout our country.*

But in mentioning all these good people, these fine names and these wonderful organizations one must realize that their prominence is emphasized in our Jewish papers and magazines. They are for our consumption. The Negro man on the street has enough

problems. He isn't overly concerned with Jewish organizations working for him way up there in the higher echelons while he is way down here in his cold water flat. He knows about Jews from his personal contact with them, not from NAACP work done by a few.

A Negro paper, the Los Angeles *Herald-Dispatch*, is even highly suspicious of such Jewish activity in the NAACP. They accuse that organization of being an "Uncle Tom" organization promoting the interests of the Jews in the guise of helping the Negro. "Each time the black man tries to establish his own leadership, he is blocked by the Jews who fear an ultimate economic loss if the Negro takes over his own destiny. Our main task then . . . is to rid ourselves of this phony Jewish leadership . . ."

We may be shocked at such a reaction to sincerely dedicated work. The newspaper is spewing forth utter nonsense, of course. But the important thing is that this is a public reaction of at least one Negro paper.

The vast majority of Boston Negroes know the Jew mainly from personal contact. Often the relationship is a good one, though in many instances the Jew is the Bossman and the Negro the Worker, a situation which is one of polar tension anyway.

The Boston Negro may know the Jew as his landlord (and his landlord may be the one who elevated the rents 25 per cent when the Negroes came sweeping through Roxbury). He may know the Jew as his corner grocer who takes from him faster than he can earn it. The Negroes regard Jewish merchants as very sharp traders—the sharpest. They are wary that they'll be cheated if they don't keep an eye on him. It shouldn't be surprising for us to hear that this attitude is the prevailing one. If a Jewish restaurant

owner can put ham on Jewish rye and tell a Judge that he thought the Jewish rye made the ham kosher; or if Jewish butchers drag their thumbs across the scales for Jewish customers (both these are actual court cases), how much more so would such a despicable person not hesitate to do the same to an uneducated Negro, particularly Southern Negroes who now comprise almost 40 percent of Boston's Negro population.

Sadly, there are some who have made their living in this manner, in utter disdain and contempt for the intelligence of their customers. One such merchant, dealing daily with Negroes, does more damage to our image in the Negro community than 1,000 Jewish members of NAACP. We may not think this fair, but these are the facts that lie at the bottom ~~of~~ strong anti-Jewish feelings among the vast majority of Negroes.

I asked a young Negro who does youth work at a church in Boston's South End what he thought of Jews generally. Twenty-two years old, he had worked for Jews and with Jews; he had dealt with Jews as owners of small retail stores. He was quite articulate and plans to become a minister. His succinct summary of his image of the Jew went like this: "The Jew is out for all he can get from anybody and everybody."

A Negro writer put it this way: "The Jew opens a business and hires his whole family. Meanwhile the so-called Negroes are footing the bill, but there isn't a black face behind a single counter in the store. . . . He will open up another business. Still later he will open a liquor store . . . soon he follows his Negro customer home and buys the flat he lives in. By that time the Jew is providing the Negro with

his food, his clothes, his services, his home and the whiskey he has to have to keep from hating himself. But the Jew doesn't live above the business anymore. He's moved on out to the suburbs and is living in the best house black money can buy." (This is a quote from Eric Lincoln's book, *Black Muslims*.)

We may consider this a fantastic distortion and a grossly unfair view of the process by which a legitimate businessman expands his enterprises as quickly as he is able. But this is written to impress Jews with what some of the Negro's impressions are, not to evaluate the truth of them. The fact is we read the wrong books and magazines. We look around for literature and headlines that will salve our egos, to let us know about our Freedom Riders and our battle for justice. But meanwhile they have more than enough trouble, so they are looking around for something to salve their egos.

When a Jewish businessman who contributes \$5 a year to the NAACP allows his shop union to bar Negroes from membership because he wants to avoid industrial strife at all costs even if it means barring qualified people from jobs, he engenders a feeling of cold rage within the Negro that no number of Dubinskys or Goldbergs can dispel. When a Jew builds a home and he doesn't insist that the contractors avoid all working groups that discriminate, the number of Jews on State Commissions Against Discrimination pales into insignificance.

When the Jews ran away from Roxbury and Dorchester the natural and normal Negro reaction was that they were running away from Negroes. I'm often asked: "Just why did you Jews flee those comfortable homes and apartments in Dorchester and Roxbury when the Negroes first started moving

in? Sure you had the money to put down payments on your homes in Brookline and Newton, the North Shore and the South Shore, but why did you choose *that* particular time to move out? Can you honestly say that there wasn't strong anti-Negro feelings mixed in? Your moving caused the collapse of a nice middle class neighborhood that almost overnight became a slum without the stability your people could have given mine."

The Negro today is angry. We, from our positions of relative comfort and security, may think that the improvements in Negro-white relations are moving along speedily. But, for these black, brown and near-white Americans who have been here 200 years and more, the pace is excruciatingly slow. Outbreaks such as Little Rock and New Orleans cause irreparable psychological damage to every American Negro. The billions of colored peoples in Asia and Africa are well informed of these incidents. Twenty-nine Asian and African nations voted the United States second only to the Republic of South Africa in its severity of discrimination against colored people.

The improvements are rarely noted in our own papers. The thought is horrendous to them that whites magnanimously grant yearly concessions where there should be an overnight lowering of all discrimination barriers.

It should be easy for us to imagine how the American Negro feels when he opens up his paper and reads of discrimination. And how much more so when he himself experiences it every day. We know the sudden disgust, hatred and fear that wells up in our breasts when we see the latest declaration of George Lincoln Rockwell or we read about a synagogue bombing

or a swastika painted on a wall. Only imagine it magnified 1,000-fold and legalized! And if it is not legalized in our own state then it is just as rigidly enforced by "gentlemen's agreements."

The "gentlemen's agreements" made against the Negroes in which we Jews participate through our failure to rise up in righteous indignation does not mean that the Negroes can't get into the best colleges. It means that he is mired in the worst grammar schools with inferior teachers.

Our "gentlemen's agreements" do not prevent him from purchasing the best homes—it keeps him from buying or renting practically all homes outside of certain districts.

Our "gentlemen's agreements" are not preventing him from securing the best managerial positions—they keep him from getting practically any job above that of custodian or day-laborer.

I asked a couple of Negro boys in the South End what they thought of the flare-up in New Orleans. One said: "I think that it's strange that any one brought up here in America in any faith should feel the way those people do. Every faith preaches equality."

"And," I added parenthetically, "they don't seem to be doing enough about it."

He nodded his head vigorously to this simple truth he feared to mention to a white man. The other boy, a high school student said simply: "I think segregation and discrimination are silly." Among his own people I'm sure he would have used stronger language.

Would you say it was "silly" that New York school children who won as a prize a trip to Washington, D. C., being outstanding members of their

safety patrols, had to cancel out because there were four *Jewish* children who couldn't go to the hotel and restaurants the group was scheduled to go to?

Would you use the word "silly" if it was a *Jewish* mother who was forced to give birth on a sidewalk outside a modern well-equipped hospital because the hospital does not allow Jews as patients? Would you consider it just "silly" that a *Jewish* doctor couldn't vote because an ignorant boor who barely got out of the eighth grade said the doctor could not pass the literacy test of his state? This is what has happened to Negroes and I assure you that this boy had a lot more to say about blind, hating discrimination than simply that it was "silly."

It is silly that Negroes have the highest death rates, the highest rates of illegitimate births, the highest percentage of aid to dependent children, the highest percentage on Welfare? (Everyone of these is over double the ratio to their percentage of the population in every major city on the East Coast, Midwest, as well as the South; 90 per cent of all people on welfare in Chicago are Negro.) Negro median money income is half that of the white population because of the vicious cycle of poor schools and poor jobs. So we are the ones who carry them along on our financial backs.

The Negro has sufficient cause for turning out acid-tongued comedians, like Dick Gregory, who, with bitter humor, excoriates the white man as a double-dealing, double-crossing, pietistic, vicious fraud who hides behind his weak individual anonymity and cries: "Not me, brother, not me! I'd help you if I could, but I just want to be loved by the right people (which you just don't happen to be at the

ANTI-SEMITISM AND HARLEM

When Sol Singer leased a store next to the Apollo Theater on 125th St. from its owner, Frank Shiffman, to open up a self-service restaurant specializing in \$1.19 steaks, some Harlem Nationalists saw this venture as a device to put out of business a steak-house on the same block owned by a Negro. Nationalist pickets, however, began to use slogans like "Black man must stay; Jew must go," and to call Shiffman a "Merchant of Venice" (they meant Shylock).

In a hard-hitting column in the *N. Y. Amsterdam News*, Harlem weekly, Jackie Robinson July 14 denounced these slogans: "Anti-Semitism is as rotten as anti-Negroism. It is a shame that, so far, none of the leaders of Harlem have yet had the guts to say so in tones which could be heard throughout the city." The Nationalists retorted by picketing Chock Full O' Nuts in Harlem (Mr. Robinson being a vice-president). Intervention in a radio debate by A. Philip Randolph, Negro labor leader, led the Nationalist leader, Lewis Michaux, to repudiate the anti-Semitism and stop the picketing. Mr. Singer has offered to sell the restaurant to Negroes.

moment.)" Most of us Jews fall into this group. Our image is bad, not because of inadequate public relations, but because we're not doing all that we could.

What can we Jews do? How can we atone for our guilt, for having done little or nothing personally up to now to help alleviate the trying conditions of our Negro neighbors who are living in homes that once were ours (the Mezuzas are still on the doorposts of their houses and upon their gates)?

William Worthy, the famed Negro journalist of the Baltimore *Afro-American*, in a recent speech before the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis, complained that while occasionally individual Jews did work for equality, the majority were more than hedging. Jews have it in their organizational power to respond massively to the plight of the American Negro on as broad a scale as we have to the needs of Jews overseas. What Mr. Worthy was say-

ing is that job discrimination, housing discrimination, renting discrimination, the over-all deprivation and uprootedness of the Negro in America, is just as urgently in need of solution as the problem of the uprooted Jews of North Africa. The one problem gets all our attention, the other very little of it.

The religious arguments for equality among men, of the brotherhood of all men under one God, have not been harkened to too often in the past. They have helped create a climate of opinion that is favorable to abolishing all practices of discrimination. The impetus for making this appeal comes not just from personal observation but from religious commitment as well. People have observed slavery and brutality for thousands of years and not reacted to it the way we do.

Our personal observation is infused with a long religious tradition of the truth of the equality of all men. We also have had a long history of suffering because of the invidious com-

parison people have made between our religion and theirs; considering their people superior, ours inferior; considering their people innately more intelligent, ours innately retarded; considering their people superior in manners and behavior, ours inferior in all ways. As it was a lie when applied to us, so is it a lie when applied to the Negro.

As strong as the religious arguments are, the economic ones should not be omitted. The economic solution to the troubles of the Negro in America doesn't even require our money—only our firm support and cooperation. And we get a return from our investment of faith in the ability of the Negro to succeed, if given a chance. The more jobs we open to the Negro, the better his income, the more he can buy, the better the economy of the country and the more jobs will then be created.

The more we extend ourselves to make sure that the almost totally Negro-less suburbs allow Negroes to enter, the more of them will move out of their present slums and into a more wholesome environment. Fewer will end up as juvenile delinquents as might the children of Negro doctors, lawyers, professors, high-rating civil servants as well as Indian and African students who want to move out now but can't.

To those who claim that they fear their white tenants' or their workers' reactions: with a little effort you can inform these people that you intend abiding by the law of the state as well as your own personal convictions. (And don't raise prices.) Such efforts will improve the Negro's image of the Jew.

Of course, it will take a little intestinal fortitude to stick to your guns

and call their bluff when 50 tenants of a 60-tenant building threaten to move out when you tell them an Indian doctor-interne is moving into "their" building. And the unions may give you trouble if you insist that they integrate. But at least you will know that you have not shirked your obligation as a *religious Jew*.

We white men, we Jews (it makes little difference to the Negro what you call yourself), have run out of promises. Malcolm X, the leader of New York's Black Muslims, expressed the feelings of millions of his people (and not just members of his religious group) when he lashed out at those who promise and swear their loyalty and then renege: "Roosevelt promised, Truman promised, Eisenhower promised. Negroes are still knocking on the door begging for civil rights . . . So you mean to tell me that in a powerful country like this . . . that a handful of men from the South can prevent the North, the West, the Central States and the East from giving Negroes the rights the Constitution says they already have? No! I don't believe that and neither do you. No white man really wants the black man to have his rights or he'd have them."

The problem rests in your hands: Do we continue to delude ourselves that we Jews are doing all we can, that if it were up to us the Negroes would have full equality tomorrow? Do we really believe that discrimination is due almost entirely to the white American Christian and therefore we don't share in the guilt?

Or do we take Malcolm X's words to our own hearts and then go out to our daily work and try to prove that he is wrong; that we Jews will rise to the challenge to establish liberty and justice for all in the land of the brave and the home of the free?