

# BLACK POWER AND THE JEWS

By MORRIS U. SCHAPPES

IT IS NO surprise that, from coast to coast, the white backlash in the recent elections should have evoked alarm and self-critical examination in the Jewish community. For the white Jewish population (and the microscopic enclave of Negro Jews is of no consequence in this situation), despite its general liberalism on racial issues and its strong progressive currents, did not prove immune to the lure of the backlash.

In Los Angeles, where Reagan was cracking the backlash, the editor of a Jewish weekly warned that the backlash "strikes in all directions" and will cut the Mexican-Americans and Jews too. "The tragedy," Herb Brin wrote in *Heritage* Nov. 3, "is clearly that many Jews as well as Mexican-Americans are donning the clothes of Babbitry and are trying desperately to join the backlash brigade."

But it was in New York City, with its almost 2,000,000 Jews, that the most acute test came—around the issue of the retention of the Civilian Review Board for complaints against police misconduct. During the campaign, it was noted that Jews were conspicuous in the leadership of the movement to *save* the Civilian Review Board from the ultra-Right attack. On record in support of the Board were such organizations as the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith, the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs, the Jewish Cultural Clubs and Societies, the Jewish Labor Committee, the New York Board of Rabbis, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), the Union of Orthodox Jewish

Congregations and the Workmen's Circle.

*Yet the returns showed that the Jewish vote had divided sharply on the Civilian Review Board, which was snowed under by a two to one vote and a plurality of over half a million. It is cold comfort, but nevertheless noteworthy for the future, that Jews were proportionately less solid in opposition to the Review Board than other ethnic groups, while in Manhattan's heavily Jewish Upper West Side support for the Board was very strong. The proportions bear examination. Thus the vote against the Review Board was six to one in the predominantly German 30th AD in Queens, in the Irish and Scandinavian 50th AD in Brooklyn and in the Italian and Irish 58th AD in Staten Island. On the other hand, in the Jewish areas where the Civilian Review Board was defeated, the vote against it ranged from five to four in Flushing, Queens, to less than three to two among the Italians and Jews in the 60th AD in Manhattan, to less than two to one among the Irish and Jews in the Inwood area, the 73rd AD in Manhattan, and to three to one in Brooklyn's 42d AD.*

The Jewish leadership is disturbed by the results of the Jewish vote. This leadership knows that while every conscious racist voted *against* the Civilian Review Board, not every one who *voted* against it was a conscious racist. Thus the day after the elections Irving M. Levine, director of education and urban programming of the American Jewish Committee, worried by the Jewish vote *against* the Board in the

middle-income areas of Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, said: "We have to be much more sophisticated about the various groupings in our city. . . . We have to find out what's bothering these (ethnic) groups and come up with liberal answers to their problems so they won't look the other way out of frustration."

Among the things obviously required is that the leadership of all Jewish organizations develop an educational campaign to reach their entire memberships with the full, bitter truth about the present situation of the Negro people, and with an understanding of their justified demands for equality in jobs, education, housing occupancy, personal dignity and respect, and civil and political opportunity. For the white backlash is nothing but the ferocious counterattack of white, entrenched and privileged racists against the beginnings of progress toward full equality made by the Negro people's movement.

In this process of education, it will be necessary to come to grips with the source and the true intent of the slogan of Black Power. This slogan is with us and will continue to be with us. Some slogans can be withdrawn, but not this one. In the 1930's, for instance, the Communist Party of the United States put forward as its ultimate aim the slogan of Soviet Power. When the Communist Party learned that the slogan was misunderstood and misinterpreted, that it found no echo among the American workers and the American people, that it was used as a club by reaction to batter the communists, the slogan was withdrawn—and is now forgotten.

But not even Stokely Carmichael could, even if he wanted to, withdraw the slogan of Black Power. For this slogan, when it was given mass media circulation on TV, radio and the

press, did find an echo and a vast resonance among the black masses. Although he objected to the slogan, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in a *N. Y. Times* ad July 26, warned that "It Is Not Enough to Condemn Black Power." And in a letter to his supporters in October, the Rev. King, still refusing to join those who merely condemned the slogan or advertised their dissociation from Black Power, explained, "The allure of 'Black Power' in its extremist or moderate sense springs from real, not imaginary causes. It is a mood of millions of Negroes, tormented and frustrated with broken promises." When the Jewish people see the situation of these millions of Negroes clearly again, these Jews will not be indifferent to the need to step up the pace of their activity in the cause of democracy and equality, a cause in which Jews have a great stake.

Some Jewish leadership is providing its followers with opportunities to hear about Black Power from those responsible leaders who advocate it. Thus Nov. 15 Stokely Carmichael addressed 1,500 persons at the Congregation Mishkan Israel, led by Rabbi Robert E. Goldberg, in Hamden, Conn. And the annual conference of the Jewish Cultural Clubs and Societies Nov. 19 heard Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality.

In the historic experience of the Jewish people there is much that can help them at least understand the slogan of Black Power. For Black Power is used by white reaction and the white ultra-Right as a term with which to frighten the white masses in something like the same way as the anti-Semites and the ultra-Right try to frighten the Gentile masses with the phrases "Zionist Power," or the so-called "International Jewish Conspiracy" or "International Zionist Conspiracy." I am by

no means equating the slogan of Black Power with these others but simply suggesting that Jews have a long experience of coping with such misinterpretations and therefore ought not to allow themselves to be misled by the misinterpretation of Black Power. In this sense, I say that Black Power is no more anti-white than Zionism, or Jewishness, or Judasim, is anti-Gentile.

Now it is true that some Zionists and Jews are anti-Gentile, just as some who use the slogan Black Power are anti-white. But this is a defensive, not an aggressive, *anti*, no matter how shrilly it is sounded. This defensive hostility is, in the Jew, bred by fear and long subjection to oppression or hostility or discrimination or mockery, and in the Negro it is bred by fear and a qualitatively more intense oppression, hostility, discrimination and mockery.

Furthermore, it is against the effect of white mockery upon the Negro's image of himself that the slogan of Black Power has been raised as a way of combatting self-hate with self-respect, with Negro racial pride. And have not the Jews, in the century and a half since the beginning of their Emancipation, also had to combat Jewish self-hate and self-depreciation, induced by concepts of Gentile-supremacy that were spread among the Jews? Should not Jewish experience therefore help them understand this aspect of the Black Power slogan, even in some of its exaggerations?

Then there is the matter of unmistakable signs of anti-Semitism among the Negro people and in the Negro ghettos. Significantly, a study of this subject at the University of California found that Negroes, despite widespread agitation to the contrary, "feel more friendly toward Jews than toward other whites." Benjamin R. Epstein, nation-

al director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, in releasing a preliminary report on this study Oct. 1, pointed out:

Nationally, 24 per cent of Negroes queried said Jewish landlords are better than other white landlords, 7 per cent said they are worse, and 69 per cent said they are the same. 20 per cent of Negroes said Jewish store owners are better than other white store owners, 7 per cent said they are worse, 73 per cent said they are the same. Of employers, 34 per cent of the Negroes said Jews are better to work for, 19 per cent said Jews are worse than other white employers, 47 per cent said they are the same. But 70 per cent said Jews are better than other whites when it comes to hiring Negroes. Hence Mr. Epstein concluded that "the Jewish community would be well advised to focus its attention on the main sources of American anti-Semitism and to drop undue preoccupation with Negro anti-Semitism, which only serves to divert energies from the civil rights struggle."

It would of course help the Negro people's struggle for equality if militant Negro leaders were publicly to explain to their Negro followers that if every Jew were miraculously to vanish from Harlem and the USA, the problems of the Negro masses would in no way be solved, that anti-Semitism is a blind alley and a diversion from the main oppressors of the Negro people. A mature Negro leadership would, for the sake of the Negro movement, combat anti-Semitism. But the failure until now to do this must not be used as an excuse by Jewish leadership, as Mr. Epstein said, to divert Jewish energies from the civil rights struggle. In this sense, education and action have to go together.

(A broadcast, slightly condensed, over WBAI-FM, New York, Nov. 15.)