

BLACK-JEWISH TALKS

Some Black leaders, such as Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP,

have said that the Andrew Young affair has opened up opportunities for new communication between the Black and Jewish communities.

Initially, that has a vague sound to it. Many people have long become disillusioned with "dialogues" between various groups, where the only product seems to be more talk. But there may be a special point to it in this case.

Communication between Black and Jewish communities began to thin out in the late 1960s, at least at the official level. Blacks and Jews had been side by side in the civil rights fight -- because civil rights were in the best interests of the Jewish community. But the civil rights victories brought with them an important surge of self-dignity and independence in the Black community. They wanted to clearly lead the fight themselves, and would tolerate no tinge of paternalism. Sensing the mood, some Jews and Jewish groups withdrew from prominence in post civil rights matters, and others were asked to withdraw.

In the ensuing low-communications period, several issues arose which were official points of conflict between Jews and Blacks, wherein the conflict was made worse by the relative lack of contact.

Neither "side" fully understood the reasons for the other's intensity.

Take the matter of quotas. Many Black leaders did not understand that most Jewish organizations supported affirmative action and even ad hoc remedial quotas; but were concerned that systematic quota systems would destroy the principles of civil rights. Jews had had tragic political experience with such quotas.

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On the other hand, many Jews did not understand that Black economic progress, compared with white progress, did not begin statistically with the passage of civil rights laws -- but only with the beginning of the affirmative action push, as in, for example, the pressure of goals, timetables. The Blacks had had tragic economic experience with the lack of such pressures.

On these issues the prevailing opinions in Black and Jewish communities were bound to differ at some points, caused by different histories. But the rhetoric of conflict -- and even some of its substance -- might have changed with a better mutual understanding.

Or take another issue which is cited: South Africa and Israel. Perhaps Black leaders have not prevalently understood that while American Jewish organizations have taken strong positions against South African racial policies, they object to Israel being *singled out* for trade with South Africa, when African countries and Soviet bloc countries do a bigger trade with South Africa. And perhaps Jewish organizations have not understood the need to emphasize and broadcast their anti-apartheid positions.

Or take the latest, the Andrew Young affair. The Jewish organizations may not have been sensitive enough to the symbolic importance of Andrew Young to a long-depressed Black community. For their part, Black organizations have not recognized that the P.L.O. is publicly dedicated to another Holocaust in the Middle East.

Benjamin Hooks was asked on radio last Sunday why there has been so much "singling out" of the Jews on these issues, since the Jews were scarcely the main force in any of these issues. Hooks replied that close friends always seem to have the sharpest spats, even when the basis for their close friendship still existed.

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"Communication" by itself will not overcome objective reasons for dispute. But communication can help put the disputes in proper perspective; and can even engender more flexibility on both sides of the disputes. Human beings are supposed to be able to do that.

So, while no magic should be expected from the discussions which are now being conducted locally and nationally, they could turn out to be much more than futile exercises in jawmanship.

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