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BLACK-JEWISH TENSIONS AND THE SCHOOLS

Almost all Jews in the United States are white. But Black-Jewish tensions are different from Black-white tensions in a couple of respects.

In one respect, Black-Jewish tensions are more comparable to Black-Latino, or Latino-Asian tensions, than they are to general Black-white tensions. They are related to the competitive edge that exists between groups that are close on the ladder of economic and political disadvantage. This manifests itself in a particular way in the history of Black-Jewish relationships.

In another respect, not unconnected, the tensions are related to the kind of emotionally charged falling-out that occurs between people who have been engaged in common cause.

Perhaps the initial question should be reversed; and, instead, we should inquire into the nature and fate of the "common cause" which Blacks and Jews have presumably shared, and by that route follow the development of the tensions.

There were scattered Jews and Jewish congregations in this country from the 17th century. But there was no significant population weight or communal presence until the latter part of the 19th century. And in that sense there were no significant "Black-Jewish relationships," as distinct from random relationships between individual Jews and individual Blacks, until well into the twentieth century. Since then, there have been three roughly definable *periods* of relationship.

The First Period began in the 1930s and was a period of political common cause between the Jewish and Black communities. For a "common cause" to exist certain areas of group self-interest must coincide importantly. That was the case in the early 1930s, for the Blacks and for the Jews. In 1933, both were economically

disadvantaged groups. The Jewish experience was still dominantly an immigrant experience. In 1905, Peter Wiernick, editorial writer of the Jewish Morning Journal of New York City, wrote: "The truth is that 85 or 90 per cent of the Russian Jews are so much below everything we know here that we would have to go to the Southern Negro for a familiar example ...". The Jews were an economic underclass not only because of their background, but because of prevailing discriminatory bars. Job ads read "Gentiles Only" just to make sure.

The common cause was primarily economic: to break down the barriers of "economic royalism," as Franklin D. Roosevelt called it; to get a piece of the apple pie; to assure a measure of economic security. This was the basis of the FDR coalition. The labor, Black and Jewish communities were highly visible elements of that coalition.

The Second Period, the post World War II 1950s, was different. In a sense, the labor unions had "made it." The average constant-dollar, earning-power wage had risen by over 50 per cent between 1939 and 1954. Much of the labor force had moved over into a middle class economic style.

In that sense, the Jewish population had also made it economically in that fifteen year period. The post-immigrant Jewish population had accomplished this mainly in the self-employed professions, and in certain marginal industries, but the bars of economic discrimination had also begun to drop considerably for the Jews. By the 1950s, the average personal income of the Jewish population compared favorably with all but the most WASPish groups in America. It was partly a misleading statistic, because the Jews still did not have access to the centers of financial power in the country, being excluded from the executive circles of the burgeoning industrial and financial corporations. But in terms of personal income, the Jews as a group were not now economically deprived, even though there were still pools of residual poverty.

There had been no such breakthrough for the Blacks, however. There had been some statistical progress resulting from the earlier political efforts. In 1939, the median wage of the Black worker was little more than a third that of the white worker; in the middle of the 1950s, it was little more than half. But such statistics also served to emphasize the enormous gap that still existed; that kind of statistical progress only raised expectations, and frustrations. The Black population was still in a severe state of economic depression -- and it was clear that discriminatory bars were still a major impediment to Black economic progress.

This set the stage for the Second Period of relationships, the civil rights revolution, which started significantly as a legislative revolution. From the close of World War II to 1964, about 40 industrial states passed laws forbidding discrimination in private and public employment, and in other areas. That movement culminated in 1964 with the passage of the federal civil rights act.

This movement was associated with the civil rights legislative drive -- and there was frequent reference to the "coalition" which spearheaded it, with the labor, Black and Jewish communities prominently in evidence. But there were some significant differences.

The priority objective of the First Coalition had been economic security and a place in the economic mainstream of America. The unifying political principles had centered around social security and fair labor practices. These were the principles around which the self-interest of these several groups coalesced. Now, in the 1950s, the objective was specifically equal opportunity for those who had been the victims of deliberate group discrimination.

Both the Black and the Jewish elements of this coalition were stronger, in themselves, than they had been during the First Coalition. In state after state, as the civil rights legislative movement gained momentum, Jewish groups were prominent

along with Black groups in the leadership of that movement. Indeed, the Jewish public affairs apparatus around the country, which had grown considerably during the Hitler years, expended most of its energy and resources on the civil rights agenda during the 1950s and early 1960s.

The intensity of the Jewish effort during this period indicated that this was for them a common cause coalition, and not just a quid-pro-quo coalition. But what was the common cause? A survey by the California State Employment Service around 1950 found that about 25 per cent of all California employers seeking white collar workers indicated that they would not hire Jews no matter how well qualified. But the Jews were heavily in the professions and self-employed by this time; there were plenty of non-discriminatory opportunities open to them, and these were clearly on the increase. In short, as a group, Jews were not suffering economically because of discrimination. What then was the compelling self-interest of the organized Jewish community in the civil rights battle? The answer to this question is important, among other reasons, in order to throw some light on the current situation.

Voting analysts have constantly pointed out, sometimes to their own astonishment, that Jews seem to be the only ethnic group in the country which does not vote its pocketbook. For example: among those of Irish descent or Italian descent or whatever, the more affluent middle class tends to vote Republican, the less affluent tend to vote Democratic in national elections. Jewish voting just does not follow this pattern. In the last Nixon presidential campaign, for example, the Jewish Republican vote was somewhat higher than it had been in most previous presidential elections; but two thirds of the Jews still voted for McGovern, and were the only white ethnic group in the country to vote a Democratic majority. Indeed the Black vote that year was instructive. In the inner rings of the cities, the Black vote for the Democrat was almost unanimous; in the outer rings of the cities, the Black vote for the Democrat was down to about 80 per cent. But in the suburbs, where 15 per cent of

the Black population now lived, often in relatively affluent ghettos, the Black vote for the Democratic candidate was a couple of percentage points below that of the Jewish Democratic vote. Indeed, according to the precinct analyses, the defection from the Democratic Party, such as it was, took place more among lower-income Jews than among higher-income Jews.

On social issues, the same pattern is invariable. For example, the Public Opinion Research office at Princeton did a survey of various religious groups and their support of the political principle of guaranteed economic security. In each case, except for the Jews, the percentage in favor of guaranteed economic security corresponded almost exactly with the percentage of urban manual workers in that group. Thus, 51 per cent of the Baptists were manual workers, and 51 per cent of the Baptists supported guaranteed security; 55 per cent of the Catholics were manual workers and 58 per cent supported guaranteed security; 28 per cent of the Congregationalists were manual workers and 26 per cent supported guaranteed security, and so forth. But while 27 per cent of the Jews were manual workers, 56 per cent of them supported guaranteed security.

This pattern of Jews voting against their pocketbook interests has sometimes led to an oversimplified self-congratulatory tone within the Jewish community. The theory has been proposed that the Jewish religious commitment to prophetic social justice is so strong that their altruistic convictions override their self-interest. There is, however, a much more compelling theory: the Jews have a group self-interest in the political arena, which is at least as strong as their economic well-being -- that is, a self-interest in *a kind of political society* which will protect the Jews from political oppression.

The Jews did have a group economic self-interest identity in the 1930s which they do not have today. But the Jews have always had a special *political* self-interest as a group, which existed separately and more durably. This fact deserves

recapitulation. At least since their dispersal, over 19 centuries ago, Jews have lived in a wide variety of political societies as a minority. In all of those societies, they have insisted on maintaining their Jewish beliefs and their Jewish communal identities. In almost all of these cases -- for a variety of religious, nationalistic and political reasons -- these societies have not tolerated these differences for very long and have moved to oppress them in one form or another. The toleration and protection of such differences of belief is, of course, one way to define political freedom in general. The Jewish historical experience has taught them that their prime self-interest as a group lies in those societies whose institutions are committed to political freedom -- that is, to the freedom of *both* individual and group differences. To put it another way: Jews have learned that their security depends less on whether people like or dislike Jews, than on whether Jews live in a kind of society where their right to individual and group differences is protected, like them or not.

The Jewish community's involvement in the Second Period, the civil rights coalition, was not the result either of its own economic self-interest, or of altruistic desires to gain social justice for the Blacks. The Jewish community was centrally involved because of its political self-interest; its instinct that the civil rights revolution would solidify the kind of society in which Jews would be protected as a minority. The Jewish community was in the civil rights coalition because its self-interest coincided with the self-interest of the Black community, even if the two were not identical in origin.

In the last dozen years, this particular coalition has virtually ceased to operate because that same self-interest of the Jews did not seem to coincide with the new strategies of the post civil rights movement. There are subsidiary reasons, but that is the central reason.

In the middle 1960s the organized Jewish community began to call for affirmative action. Along with the rest of the civil rights movement, it recognized that the civil rights revolution would never catch up with historic oppression of Blacks unless extraordinary efforts were made. Society now had to become beneficently race-conscious. Employment tests and standards had to be revised to become job-relevant. Active searches had to be made for qualified Black workers. Special training programs had to be set up for qualifiable Black workers. And employers had to be actively pushed towards fulfilling equal opportunity laws. The organized Jewish community supported all these developments.

Then gradually these affirmative action proposals evolved into normative quota proposals. It wasn't the absolute idea of employment quotas which frightened the Jewish leaders. There were not the same negative reactions to specific quotas imposed as the only remedies for recalcitrant employers, those who resisted affirmative action. What was disturbing was the developing image of an America in which proportional group representation would be the prevailing pattern, not just in jobs, but in politics, and in other spheres of American life. This image was antithetical to the Jewish self-interest in a kind of society characterized by individual freedom as well as by pluralism.

The Jews had lived in societies in which only groups were assigned rights and individuals had their rights and identity only through their membership in a group. They had learned that that was not the kind of society in which political freedom could flourish, nor in which they could live in freedom.

In most cases, the group-proportion proposals which Jewish organizations began to oppose in the late 1960s and the 1970s, were not in situations which offered any direct economic threat to Jews. There were a couple of noteworthy exceptions. One developed in some urban school systems, epitomized by the Bedford-Stuyvesant embroglio in the late 1960s. One of the significant ways in which members of New York's

economically deprived Jewish community was able to avoid discriminatory bars and enter the economic mainstream in the 1930s was by breaking into the school system as teachers. In the 1960s group-proportion formula to displace the just-emerged group with a newly emerging group seemed a classic form of economic confrontation.

Professional school admissions might also be seen as a form of this classic economic confrontation between emerging and just-emerged groups -- in the sense that the Jews had made their escape from economic oppression primarily through the professional route. However, the organized Jewish community was more ambiguous on this issue, since it seemed to be a cross between a group-proportion approach, and a legitimate affirmative action relating to remedial education. Two major national Jewish organizations supported the De Funis case, two other major national Jewish organizations opposed it. There was some division, too, on the case of Bakke, who is not Jewish. Generally speaking, the chief objections in the Jewish community were not that race was taken into consideration as a factor -- but that the use of a group-proportion numerical formula was institutionalized.

These points of direct economic confrontation are real, and there will be others, especially during a period of economic crunch. However, they are the exceptions in the quota controversy. They are not as prevalent as was the economic confrontation between Jews and Blacks, when the latter were moving into neighborhoods right behind Jews, who then so often became the landlords and small merchants. That confrontation scene has been disappearing. And direct confrontation on the employment scene is actually taking place more often between Blacks and members of other emerging racial and ethnic groups, than between Blacks and Jews.

The Black community, of course, perceives the quota question quite differently. They are not pursuing a political ideology, a group-proportion ideology at all through their support of the quota; primarily they are extending their pursuit of

economic justice. The Black experience with the lack of political freedom is as intense as, if less varied than, that of the Jews. But the Black relationship to American freedom has been substantially different than that of the Jews. The Jews came to this country, having been in a state of oppression elsewhere. The Blacks were brought to this country for oppression *by this* society. The Jews have a sense of the potential of American political freedom, which they are interested in strengthening and maintaining. There is less natural reason for Black Americans to have a sense of that potential. And there is little reason for American Blacks to believe that economic progress will be maintained without the most severe and mandatory measures.

More than that, it has always been axiomatic that for the economically deprived, economic aspirations will take priority over the imperatives of political freedom. In brief, *economic* justice is still the *first* priority self-interest consideration of the Black community. *Political* freedom, rooted in individual freedom, is the first priority self-interest consideration of the Jewish community. These two different priority self-interests were operative in the Second Coalition; but in that civil rights context they were totally congruent with each other. Today these same self-interests are not seen as congruent with each other. There is probably no way in real life to fully reconcile these priority self-interests.

The implications for the schools are rather clear. It is not a simple brotherhood training which is needed, or even possible. What is needed is the development of a broad sense of the history in which both groups -- and others -- have been caught. The universal should be drawn from the concrete experience of both groups. The genocide of the Nazis and the genocide of the Middle Passage are not that dissimilar.

Treating both group histories in depth is critical, but it is not yet enough. If young people are exposed to the general perspective of history, beyond slogans and dates, they will tend to understand the imperatives of democratic life. In this case, it is the understanding that there are group differences which we don't have to like; the civilized restraint is that we eschew bigotry in our rejection; and that we don't violate people's rights even if we don't like them. Otherwise we all lose. The lesson is clear in history without undue doctrination. It is not an accident that group prejudice, against Blacks or against Jews, is invariably in direct statistical relationship to level of education.

In other words, there are no special educational programs required. The schools just have to do what they are supposed to do in any case: develop a broad historical perspective. In this era, this should include proper attention to group histories, not just for the groups in question but for everyone. The problem is that there is less history being taught, less and less well in a more and more faltering school system.