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BLACKS AND JEWS, 1980

The Great Hiatus (Before Andrew Young)

There has been a decade-long hiatus in the relationship between blacks and Jews. There were routine contacts at the highest levels, and ongoing friendships, but not the earlier depth of communal relationships. The reasons included the separatist mood in the black community; and the in-growing preoccupations of the Jewish community, centered around Israel's new problems.

But there seemed to be relative peace between the two communities. There were third-world sparks from the black community, especially during the early part of the hiatus period; and there were occasional sparks on the legal front with respect to quota questions. But many people expected things to fall back into place eventually.

The Hiatus Disturbed (Before Andrew Young)

However, communities began to feel the deepening of tensions in recent months, *before* the Andrew Young affair. Some meetings were being scheduled to look at these tensions.

These tensions seemed to center around economic confrontation -- at the middle class level. The earlier confrontation of landlords and tenants, small merchants and ghetto customers was largely past. It was now largely a middle class conflict, which had been foreshadowed in the schools problems of the late 1960s.

The blacks had entered the middle class at a great rate, tripling their proportion during the hiatus. Much of this was in public life and administration, although it was also in private industry.

Now, the new black middle class was very uneasy. There was inflation which threatened their economic success, and the general economic crunch which slowed down and threatened jobs and advancement. There were a variety of episodes: school districts displacing personnel, other public agencies doing the same, sharper competition for federal grants, sharper competition for entrepreneurs, college faculty, professional training, etc.

It became apparent in some places, that the disturbed black middle class was often singling out the Jews in these situations. The quantity and role of the Jews in these situations were, of course, highly exaggerated -- but they *did* tend to be highly visible.

The "quota question" became symbolic for all these middle class concerns -- and the visibility of the Jews in these matters intensified the "singling out." But behind that symbolic issue were real situations of economic conflict, as perceived by many middle class blacks. And many of these blacks also were the spokesmen for the ghetto poor.

The Climax (After Andrew Young)

Discussions with blacks in many communities, after the Young resignation, led to the conclusion that very few black middle class local leaders, much less the under-privileged, were very concerned about the PLO or the Middle East situation in general. (Nor very taken with the abstract arguments about the loss of oil affecting black jobs.)

They were concerned about Andrew Young, as a symbol. And for many of them the circumstances of his resignation now served as a symbol of how the Jews generally block the advancement of upwardly-mobile blacks. It fit and released the disaffections that had been brewing before. It is significant that at local discussions, the first item laid on the table by black participants was still the "quota issue," symbolic of their economic concerns.

The Significance

There are now two tendencies working in the black community: the old economic issue, engineered by middle class disaffection; and the "third-world" impulse which has been revived by Andrew Young and the SCLC.

The danger is that these two tendencies will become melded. It is possible that they can become melded, because it may be useful for some black politicals, because Andrew Young has been thrust into such a symbolic position, because so many of the black middle class were exposed to third world ideology during the 1960s.

The danger is two-fold: 1) that Israel's cause will suffer substantially. The Black Congressional Caucus's support of Israel has been almost the margin of victory on some foreign aid votes. But there are also some white metropolitan Congressmen subject to black political mood; 2) that such a melding of the two tendencies provides the classic basis for ideological anti-semitism in America. The "third world" ideology has always had a basic set against the Jews as well as against Israel (e.g.: if we are engaged in a "class" war in this country, rather than anything else, then the Jews are seen as in the wrong class). If this ideology is systematically attached to the disaffections of the black middle class, who are also spokesmen for the black disadvantaged -- and attached further to the best interests of a section of America's elite, the Arabists and even the oil companies -- then we have something dangerous.

It is certainly not assured that this will happen. There are black leaders who want to pull back from it; there are black leaders who have a political investment in the Jewish community. But it would be pollyanna to accept the current statements of some of those black leaders that the only reasons for such tension now is that "good friends fight harder than enemies." The potential danger, for Israel and for American Jewry, is greater than that.

The Strategy

Some suggest that we declare war on the blacks, or at least their leadership. After all, they are a minority. That would be a disastrous course for Israel, and for the American Jewish community. We need black support on both counts; and we *don't* need to help unify an anti-semitic ideological force in America.

Others suggest that we pull back on some of our positions (e.g., quotas), and make friends again. But we won't make friends that way (e.g., the quota issue is only a symbolic issue. And that kind of weakness and backing-off from principle never works).

There is an over-arching significance that has come to a head, for our general consideration. The danger to Israel and to American Jewry and to democratic life, in today's world, comes from the ideological left, not from the right. The "left" in this case is a vague enough category but includes the hard-core left as well as that liberal segment which is drenched with third-world ideology.

(Some of the pieces fall together: the PLO as a "left" mechanism, rather than just a Palestinian agency -- appearing as such in Japan, Germany, Iran, Nicaragua, etc. And the PLO as the center-piece of the "left" in America-- and watch the campuses this year.)

However, while this is a consideration to constantly ponder, it does not lead us to a general rapprochement with whatever "right" we can find, on a range of issues. In this case, the enemy of our enemy is not necessarily our friend.

The center is where we belong, and what we have to strengthen. We *still* have a stake in the economic advancement of the black population in America. We *still* have a stake in having the blacks in the anti-bigotry, anti-repression circle with us. Our problem will be the tendency of the black population to be attracted to "left" influences in their aspirations. Our challenge is to try to keep a significant black segment attracted to centrist movements as much as possible; and to maintain a centrist movement which is attractive in those terms, and effective.

In sum, we would seem to have the following immediate action imperatives:

- 1) To engage ourselves in more systematic communication with the black community. We have just not talked enough during the hiatus. For example, they don't understand our stance with respect to Israel. We don't understand the significance of affirmative action to them. (And they don't quite understand our position on that; I'm not sure *we* do anymore.)

That kind of communication will not solve the problems. Indeed, it might create some problems, as "understanding each other" sometimes does. But we cannot any longer afford benign neglect with respect to such communications, in the hope that everything will somehow go away. If we don't have too high expectations, and if we do it carefully, such discussion can be somewhat prophylactic.

"Doing it carefully" means such obvious things as avoiding mass meetings, or too much formalization. But at the very least, such discussions should be held to discharge our responsibility to hammer on the nature and danger of ideological anti-semitism as a common enemy (e.g., the "singling-out" phenomenon, whether applied to quota opposition and the Jews, or the Andrew Young resolution, or South Africa and Israel, or whatever). And after defining the line, we have to make it clear that it is the line which we will not tolerate anyone crossing. (The next step to clarify is how the PLO fits into that line.)

- 2) To proceed forthrightly on our centrist agenda for social progress, in or out of *ad hoc* alliances with the blacks.
- 3) Within that context, to pay more specific attention to the underlying causes of those situations in which middle class intergroup confrontations are taking place (e.g., the constriction of educational institutions; the static nature of medical training institutions).

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- 4) To intensify our *general* efforts to clarify the real nature of the PLO to the public, black and white.
- 5) To provide some more orientation on all of this to the Jewish community -- so that we are not in the position of just flailing around for the purpose of constituency-gratification.

September 1979