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IS THERE A CIVIL RIGHTS AGENDA FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY TODAY?

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The heart of our current civil rights problem is not the debate surrounding affirmative action and quotas... nor the recent racist events in New York or Georgia... nor even the level of overt discrimination which continues to exist in our society.

And raising welfare payments or providing better medicare or increasing the number of jobs are all important social objectives, but they will not eliminate our current civil rights problem.

The heart of our civil rights problem today lies somewhere in the mass of black and other minority youth and families who are still caught in the cruelty and hopelessness of what has been called the sub-culture of poverty, apparently as far away from the mainstream of the American dream as ever.

That is not the only problem in America which calls for our compassionate concern. It is probably not the most important problem, depending on your measure of importance. But it has a certain special significance, besides being the explicit subject of our discussion today. And it is a largely abandoned problem.

If we look at the domestic social agenda of the Jewish community, as revealed by recent NJCRAC program plans, for example, we will find few items addressed in any major way to that problem. We find some continuing civil rights concerns, prime vintage 1950s and 1960s; and we find some concerns about providing a more comfortable safety-net for those who have failed to make it- but we find less than we used to about the business of enabling them to join the mainstream.

To begin with, civil rights meant equal opportunity for every individual, regardless of group. But we always had something additional in mind, when we talked about "good intergroup relations."

"Good intergroup relations" was a euphemistic term which, at its most serious, meant that we could not afford any deeply disaffected or alienated ethnic group. Social justice aside, the existence of such disaffected groups was a sure democracy-buster, in one way or another.

Civil rights for individuals was of course necessary for dispelling such group disaffection, but it was never sufficient. There was the additional factor of achieving some order of group status. That was why the Black Revolution followed the Civil Rights Revolution.

No individual can or should be guaranteed more than equal opportunity, actively implemented. But an ethnic group does reasonably expect that it can look forward to a configuration of results which are not massively out of line with the rest of society. Otherwise it will be an alienated group, especially if it can reasonably ascribe its disproportionate disadvantage to the deliberate workings of that society.

The Jewish community relations field has a mandate to be concerned about individual civil rights for members of any group. That principle of law affects our security directly. Note the remedial payment just made, under the civil rights laws, to a Jew whose employer denied him the right to take off a religious holiday. But we also have a mandate to be concerned about group alienation in general, because we know from hard experience that intergroup conflict leads to the kind of bitter fragmentation and political extremism which threatens democracy and the Jews.

In sum, when we refer to the "civil rights problem," we are not just referring to equal opportunity and treatment under the law. We are talking about the problem of reducing the legitimate alienation of any ethnic group. Furthermore, we are under the practical pressure of the affirmative-action words used in Brown II: "With all deliberate speed."

Even in the simpler civil rights dimension of equal opportunity, we quickly learned that providing law enforcement for gross violations were not enough. We said, for example: it is necessary to go out and actively inform qualified minority workers that they are now welcome.

And, because we found that some pressure had to be kept on employers and unions to practice non-discrimination in fact, we said: create some reasonable goals and keep a public record of the progress you make. We should never forget that the pace of progress in hiring was directly related to those pressures, institutionalized in the civil rights law by President Johnson in 1968.

A good case can be made that individual civil rights, with affirmative action pressure has been working. Three decades ago, little more than one out of ten black workers was in classically middle-class, white-collar, better-paid occupations. Today almost 4 out of 10 are in such occupations. A significant number of individual blacks have become part of the middle class. Perhaps the most striking

image of civil rights success is that young black married couples with a college education have an income just about equal to young married white couples with the same education.

Another example: In 1960 only half the proportion of Southern blacks as compared to Southern whites, voted; today the proportions are about the same. Those results must remain irreversible, and that is why Jews had to march, as so many did, in Forsyth County, to uphold such standards.

Incidentally, Forsyth County was itself a perverse demonstration of the triumph of civil rights in the last quarter of a century. At the beginning of that period, civil rights marchers in the South were savagely attacked by the local and state law enforcement agencies. In January of this year, they were protected by those law enforcement agencies. It was never the object of the civil rights movement to directly erase prejudice. The object was to create civil rights under the law for minorities, even if people were prejudiced against them.

Almost all of these results, and their pace, were created by affirmative action programs to implement the civil rights laws on the books. We have to maintain our agenda support of these programs, just as we have to continue our opposition to normative and rigid quotas. Such quotas are destructive of individual civil rights; and destructive as well of any kind of rehabilitative affirmative action. We were not seriously threatened by the possibility that such quotas would systematically take over, except in a few arenas. And it makes sense for us to be tolerant of temporary quotas set by the courts when there has not been good faith compliance with court-ordered affirmative action. But it was important for the anti-quota principle to be established. However, we can scarcely make anti-quotas the center-piece of our civil rights agenda; and we have to continue to support affirmative action pressure for individual civil rights.

But despite the dramatic progress, there is a large mass of black and some other minority population which is not making it. Two decades ago, this schizoid lag was apparent to observers. A Washington Post analysis of the poorer black inner city neighborhoods reported in 1969, in the middle of some general civil rights progress, that "poverty in these places has increased, average family income has not risen and unemployment rates have remained very high. This deterioration may reflect the migration of the more successful families from the slums, leaving behind widows, deserted wives and children...those least able to cope with their social and economic problems..."

The fact is that the situation in these racial and ethnic poverty ghettos has become worse, even while the black

middle class has grown. About 3 out of 10 blacks live below the poverty level. If all government aid were added to income level, that figure would drop by a half, but money income is the mark of economic independence. Besides, the poverty rate among blacks is three times higher than among whites, whatever measure we use.

That schizoid situation is further dramatized when we note that between the 1970s and the 1980s, the median income of married black families moved closer to the income of married white families- but the income of black single-spouse (largely female) families moved further away from both black married couples and white single-spouse families. Thus, progress on the one hand, regression on the other. And more than half of black births now occur to young unmarried women, more than five times the white rate.

Such a disproportionate density of hopeless poverty identified with a specific racial or ethnic group is of special concern. And while the objective situation may be somewhat schizoid, the total group alienation is not. Since 1964, more and more whites, but fewer and fewer blacks have responded affirmatively when asked whether there has been a "lot" of positive change for blacks. Despite the fact that more individual blacks are expressing satisfaction about their personal fortune and future, fewer of them are saying that a lot of progress has been made for blacks as a group. There is a serious problem of smoldering group disaffection, therefore a civil rights problem which Americans for many reasons, and Jews for those and other reasons, ignore at their peril.

It is apparently a problem impervious to earlier programs of equal opportunity, including affirmative action towards that end. Not only is there no "deliberate speed," there seems to be increased density. Kenneth Clark referred to the "tangled pathology" associated with the problem, both as cause and result. Central to that situation, according to the recent deliberations of black organizations, is the income-depressing, education-depressing, alienating factor of a large disproportion of very young single-parent families.

In general, the average income of single-parent families is about one third of families with spouse present. And about 4 out of 10 black families are headed by single women as compared with 1 out of 10 white families. Furthermore, that gap is getting larger and larger.

This family situation is not just a proximate cause of the civil rights problem we are addressing; it is, in a more profound sense, a result of that civil rights problem. The "tangled pathology" at its base was manufactured by the American society, in the long-range destructive attack on

the black family, in the long build-up of hopelessness and oppression.

The result is something more than "just" poverty. Such a "tangled pathology" has been called by many sociologists "social disorganization-" a term which does not explain much but describes a great deal. The point is that such social disorganization, with its base in the family situation, almost always has systematic economic depression and social oppression at its historical root - but then has a momentum of its own. It will not be dispelled in the long run without economic remedy, but economic remedy by itself will not be enough.

By the same token, this is not just the matter of a general loss of family values in America. It is a specific problem for a specific group, with a special density and a special import, largely and deliberately created by this society. Therefore, an affirmative action program for improved group results, beyond affirmative action for equal opportunity, is called for.

This commentary has concentrated on the black population. It will continue to do so. Every identifiable group should receive full attention with respect to equal individual opportunity and affirmative action towards that end: women, aged, handicapped, every racial, religious, sexual and ethnic group. For most of those groups, that civil rights program, if implemented, will accomplish what is necessary. By and large, most of those groups do not require the additional kind of affirmative action program for group results needed to dispel serious group alienation.

There are hispanic populations in this country which do need such further attention, for similar reasons. But that attention needs to be different because it is so often related to fresh immigration; and their problems are not as thoroughly rooted in this society. The black population is the bellwether of the larger civil rights problem in this country, as it has always been.

Bayard Rustin has properly cautioned against this objective situation within the black population being subverted for racist images and purposes. He calls for "non-racial programs for economic justice." But, we must both keep Rustin's caution in mind, and at the same time recall Lyndon Johnson's classic image of affirmative action: can we make the race for economic justice fair if we just unshackle the disadvantaged runner after the other runner is already part-way through the race? That image is particularly apt when applied to areas impacted with the pathologies of "social disorganization." Perhaps it would be best to refer to the need for such affirmative action for all identified SDA's, concentrated Socially Disorganized Areas, even though we

recognize that most of them will be racial or ethnic in nature, therefore bearing a civil rights dimension.

What, then is the affirmative action program which applies to this phase of the civil rights problem? Sometimes, it gets lost in the cracks between our equal opportunity program and our desire for a better society in general. There is a difference between civil rights in particular, and social compassion in general. Take the problem of the homeless, which we have suddenly come to notice. It is a problem compounded by our callousness, especially our callousness to the problems of the emotionally disabled. We have to address it. But we should know that in addressing that problem, we are not seriously addressing the current civil rights problem.

Similarly, when we address other so-called "safety-net" problems, such as the indigent aged, or the hungry, or the paucity of welfare payments, we are only marginally touching on the current problems of civil rights, of group alienation. In short, we are not, by these means, bringing the deeply depressed sectors of the ethnic underclass significantly closer to the mainstream.

The general economic condition of our country obviously has a relationship to our mandate. The emergence of a black middle class occurred under the impetus of civil rights and affirmative action for civil rights, but in circumstances of an expanding American economy. And a sharp decline in our economy would negatively affect the civil rights progress that has been made. Of course, Jewish security and Jewish community relations have many stakes in a stable and thriving American economy. The only mass anti-semitic movement we had in this country was during a time of pervasive depression. America's apparent movement from a manufacturing-and-farm economy to a finance-dominated economy may have many hazards. At the least, we have the ominous image of some unemployed people from the Midwest coming to Forsyth County to give aid to the KKK.

But, to begin with, it is not clear that Jewish community relations agencies, as such, have much to add, either by mandate, consensus or expertise to such global economic problems as inflation, taxes, the national debt and mainstream job production. Perhaps because of our biases, we have a tendency to believe that the application of social compassion, or the establishment of stronger safety nets will solve our global economic problems. They are worthwhile objectives in themselves but they will not solve our global economic problems.

At the least, no matter how undeniably inter-connected our economy is with most of our problems - including American aid to Israel- it is predictable that the Jewish community

will not be able to gather consensually around any proposed major economic remedies. No two different coveys of Jewish economists can gather consensually around any proposed major economic remedies.

Perhaps, under the circumstances, the Jewish community relations field should take an approach to the economy which is stimulating rather than position-taking. Perhaps a kind of model lies in the subject of nuclear arms. Everybody not clinically insane is against war and in favor of multilateral nuclear disarmament; but every two groups of experts disagree about their means of accomplishment. Some Jewish communities have launched educational campaigns just designed to stimulate thought about the remedial alternatives. The objective: a more active and better-informed individual citizen's choice. That may be all we can do as a common Jewish enterprise on the economy- but, if we have the energy and resources, perhaps we should do no less.

However, more pertinent to today's discussion, neither the safety nets nor the betterment of the overall economy will realistically address that most stubborn civil rights problem which is our subject today. Neither the creation of more mainstream jobs, for example, or more generous welfare standards will in themselves crack that problem. This core problem became worse even during periods when mainstream jobs and welfare standards were increasing.

Our civil rights problem is more specific than that. What we have to do is rehabilitate the concept of affirmative action for the advancement of some ethnic group results. There is no easy blueprint for what has to be done. But neither is there great mystery. There are perhaps only two institutional settings in which, as a society, we have some access to the children and to the families which are involved.

The first is the school system. We know what kinds of programs this would mean, because we have thought about it before. The schools would take on a specific social function as well as an educational function. It would mean not just visiting teachers to make contacts with the home; but street workers to make direct contact with the children. And it would mean that they both would have to have some imaginative incentive programs at their disposal. It would mean clinics at the schools to perform social as well as medical functions.

And to make the job even more difficult, it would have to be done without return to the self-defeating, politicized, standards-dropping programs of the sixties, which brought the city schools in general to a doldrums.

The other institutional setting with major access is that of the welfare system itself. That is not a matter of raising

welfare grants, but of insisting that the welfare parent complete education and job-training for a kind of work which actually exists, in conjunction with adequate child care facilities. This is, of course, in the WIN (Work Incentive Program) tradition, but done more seriously, systematically, and in coordination with school programs.

None of these kinds of affirmative action programs will come as news to anyone. They have been proposed in the past; they still exist in a scattered fashion- but they have been applied with less and less seriousness. And the Jewish community has become less and less involved with them.

The major problem is not to identify the remedial roads; the major problem today is to revive the will to do them- and to revive that will first at the local levels. The Jewish community would be most effective if, its own will revived, it could become part of efforts in communities around the country to revive the local will for those kinds of specific affirmative action programs.

This loss of serious will has resulted from several factors. These are difficult, often frustrating and strikingly non-panacea-like programs. At best, they will not have the dramatic impact of earlier individual equal opportunity programs. The results will not be measured in mass improvements, but only in subtly reversing the tide.

Also, they are costly programs at a time when money is dear. In addition, it is easier to claim virtue by loudly reaffirming individual civil rights, or calling for a better economy, or joining in an ecumenical hunger project, all worthy endeavors.

On another level, many people may feel that this is a tolerable problem, as long as the social pathology it creates which affects them, such as crime, can be reasonably contained. There have been no recent riots. Much of the activist leadership has been drawn out of the poverty ghettos for the time being, ironically because of progress on other civil rights fronts. There are some more pressing problems calling on our compassionate energies, many of them easier to contemplate. And someday, over the rainbow, when the world gets all better, with a new order of abundance, this problem, too, will naturally dissipate.

On the latter score, they may be right; who knows? But the hard fact is that this ethnic sub-culture of poverty exists today, an artifact of our society. It will not melt at all in the foreseeable future, much less with "deliberate speed" without this kind of systematic affirmative action. And as far as the Jewish community relations field is concerned, it is a civil rights problem, it is our problem. Not just a general matter of economic justice, it uniquely

affects ethnic groups, intergroup relations. It presents a potential of hazard familiar to and particular to the community relations agenda: intergroup conflict and alienation, especially if general conditions worsen, would be predictably dangerous to democracy in general and to the Jews in particular. And it is a problem which falls specifically within our experience and expertise.

We may not have the will to seriously attack this problem of a stubborn ethnic sub-culture of poverty. We must continue to support the simpler principles of individual civil rights; for various reasons, it is reasonable for us to be concerned about certain safety-net standards; and we can make all kinds of global economic proclamations. But unless we help to revive this specific kind of affirmative action program, then let us understand that we are abandoning today's central civil rights problem.