

Earl Raab

THE REAL FARRAKHAN FACTOR

There is nothing special about the fact that Louis Farrakhan is anti-semitic. There will always be bigots. And there will always be black bigots as well as white. Farrakhan's significance does not primarily lie in the arena of black-Jewish relations. The most notable, and most ominous factor in the Farrakhan phenomenon is less particular than that.

Andrew Young, in an August interview, roundly attacked anti-semitism, and at the same time said that he agreed with nine tenths of what Farrakhan was saying. "Farrakhan is a legitimate player in the mainstream of black ideas," said Young, and added that Farrakhan's ideas should be viewed as "simply mechanisms for survival for people who have been locked out of the economy."

Another black leader, Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles, closely tied to the Jewish community, attacked anti-semitism in general and Farrakhan's anti-semitism in particular, but also qualified any total disapproval by neutrally noting that "I am sure there are many people who agree with much of what (Farrakhan) said...He talked about economic development." Before Farrakhan's Madison Square Garden event in October, while Cardinal O'Connor denounced Farrakhan's

anti-semitism, the pastor of a Catholic church in Harlem said, "I see 99 per cent of Louis Farrakhan's message as positive."

Press interviews with members of the audience at major Farrakhan meetings reported similar comments as typical. The Washington Post recorded this audience reaction, for example: "I thought he preached a lot of hatred but I didn't hear that...I might not agree with everything he says. It's no different than people who support Reagan. Do they agree with everything he says?"

it is not bigotry itself, but a related factor which most notably and dangerously characterizes Farrakhan. He scarcely invented this factor; it has graced the most effective politicians of bigotry in history. They marry their bigotry with a program addressed to the legitimate, urgent and unmet needs of a large sector of the population. Hitler addressed his program to a hungry and humiliated population. Father Charles Coughlin, who headed the largest mass anti-semitic movement in American history, offered a program to the poverty-stricken of the depression, and titled his newspaper, "Social Justice." Meir Kahane speaks to an Israeli youth whose lives are tortured by incessant warfare and terrorism, and who fear for the survival of their state.

This eternal factor- that of the Poisoned Good- is apparently so seductive that it needs constant review. The Poisoned Good is not synonymous with routine political compromise, wherein we support a political candidate with whose program we partly disagree. If a piece of fruit has a discrete rotten spot, we can cut it out or eat around it. But some rotten spots are so pervasively corrupting that they spread their poison to the whole fruit, making the otherwise good portions inedible and deadly.

Genophobia, the active hatred of an entire human group because of its ancestry, is a sentiment so antithetical to the very basis of civilized social values that it is immiscible with a program which purports to serve any of those social values. No matter what it otherwise proposes, a political program which is so explicitly contemptuous of human life and its divinity must end up destroying human lives, including those of the program's adherents.

However, the critical element in the political success of this factor is not the genophobe himself but the indifference of his public to his bigotry. The classic illustration in the survey literature was the study done in the 1970s by the University of California. Americans were asked how they would vote in the case of a Congressional candidate whose political program included explicit anti-semitism. Only about five per cent said they would vote for

him on that account, but about a third of the respondents admitted that his anti-semitism "wouldn't make any difference." It is this indifference which is built into the factor of the Poisoned Good and makes it politically effective. It is this indifference which is disturbing in so many reactions to Farrakhan.

Denial is often a defense of this indifference. Andrew Young said in August to the Baltimore Jewish Times that he was willing to deplore Farrakhan for anti-semitic statements if could verify them, but said that Farrakhan "insists he's being misread...In the speeches I have heard him make, I have never heard him say anything against Jews." But let there be no confusion about Farrakhan's anti-semitism. In 1972, on Station WABC-TV, Farrakhan was talking about Jews being in control of the media. In 1984, on Channel 5 in Chicago, he said: " I warned the Jewish people (against harming Jesse Jackson) because I believe they have a great awesome power and control over The Washington Post, The New York Times, CBS, NBC, ABC and over affiliate stations. Now, of course, there are other whites who are in powerful positions. But I look at these men as being a wicked cabal that manipulates the mass mind...I call them demons who actually work to exacerbate tensions and put brother against brother, race against race and people against people."

Farrakhan has continually decried undue Jewish power and Jewish exploitation of the blacks. Michael Kramer, in New York magazine, quotes him as saying of the Jews: "They know someday they will be punished for the bad things they have done to blacks...(They) didn't apologize for putting my brothers and sisters to live in homes or apartments and charging them the highest rents...(They) don't apologize for sucking the blood of our poor people that (they) might live well.(They) don't apologize for seducing a nineteen-year old girl and making her take off her clothes." The latter was a reference to a former black Miss America who had disrobed for a magazine. "I'm not backing down from Jews," said Farrakhan, "because I know their wickedness."

The words are there. The tone is there. And the ideological design is there. The Village Voice columnist, Julius Berman, wrote that when Farrakhan was head of Mosque No. 7 in Harlem, "it was one of the few places in the city where one could purchase copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Farrakhan has packaged old-fashioned anti-semitism with new-fangled "Third World" anti-Zionism. Most Jews would be happier if Farrakhan would not constantly attack Israel - but that in itself is not the legitimate cause of their special outrage at his remarks on the subject. It is not just the strong tone, as in his description of Israel as a "wicked hypocrisy." He brings all the furniture of the conspiracy theory to bear. In 1974, in Muhammad Speaks, he

was warning politicians not to become "a pawn of Zionism and Jews in America against the just cause of the Arabs today." Ten years later, at a conference of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, he talked about "the Jewish pressure" that is brought to bear on "any black man or woman or other kind of man or woman who will stand up for justice and will not bow to the forces of Zionism and imperialism." And in the same June, 1984 speech in which he referred to Judaism as a "gutter religion," Farrakhan called American supporters of Israel "part of a criminal conspiracy." What does it take to convince Andrew Young?

The seductive nature of the Poisoned Good is underlined by the fact that Farrakhan's attitudes towards Jews—and towards Israel — do not represent American black attitudes towards Jews or Israel. The 1984 national survey of Jewish attitudes conducted by Stephen Cohen asked American Jews to rank various groups as to their anti-semitism. Blacks came out on the top of this list, out-ranking big business, the state department, conservatives and other groups, with only the fundamentalists coming close. This may be a reaction to Farrakhan and his ilk, but it is a vast mistaking of the black population as a whole.

In his landmark 1967 survey study, in the middle of the "Black Revolution," Gary Marx found a pattern of black attitudes that has roughly continued to this day. On a

scale of attitudes, 20 per cent of American blacks thought Jews were better than other non-whites, 5 per cent thought them worse, and the rest didn't make any distinction. There was about the same slight pattern of black favoritism towards Jews, in both North and South, when blacks were asked whether they would prefer to work for a Jew, buy from a Jew or rent from a Jewish landlord. On a few abstract economic questions about Jewish shrewdness and avarice, blacks rated Jews somewhat less favorably than did American whites. However, blacks were slightly less anti-semitic on an overall scale than were American whites.

But this was at the same period when some black intellectuals were saying quite the opposite. James Baldwin wrote in 1962 that " just as society must have a scapegoat, so hatred must have a symbol. Georgia has the Negro and Harlem has the Jew."

The point is that intellectuals tend to deal in symbols more than do the rank and file. The factor of education, the strongest single correlation ever found for anti-semitism, has not worked in quite the same way for blacks as it has for whites. Statistically, college educated whites are radically less anti-semitic than the less educated; college-educated blacks are only mildly less anti-semitic. Enter political symbolism and ideology, especially of the "third world" variety. The comprehensive package of "third world"

ideology as it affects the Jews, ties together: Zionism; American imperialism; the "colonialism" of America towards American blacks; the "colonialism" of Israel towards Arabs; the paucity of American help for blacks; America's largesse to Israel. The oppression of blacks by Jewish landlords and merchants fits nicely into that package.

It was indeed Malcolm X who put together some of those elements early in the 1960s. He expressed his anger at "the Jews who with the help of Christians in America and Europe drove our Muslim brothers out of their homeland where they had been settled for centuries, and took over the land for themselves." He pointed out that the aid sent to Israel to support its aggression against the Third World was taken from the pockets of American blacks. And then talking about the Jewish businessmen who deal with blacks, he said that these Jewish businessmen "are seen by the Negroes in Harlem as colonialists..."

But this kind of ideology, which affected a sector of black intellectuals, did not have much of a direct impact on the American black population as a whole. American blacks with opinions have tended to be more sympathetic to Israel than to the Arab nations by a two to one ratio, according to nine Gallup polls between 1973 and 1983. The average ratio for white Americans during those years has been about four to one. That disparity does not reflect any significant

difference in explicit favoritism towards the Arabs. On the average, about 11 per cent of the general population has favored the Arab nations, and about 15 per cent of the blacks. But fewer than half of the blacks have had any opinions or favorites.

In other words, when Farrakhan- or Jessie Jackson, for that matter- expresses concern for the deprivation in their daily lives, he speaks to and for the body of American blacks. He does not speak to or for them when he attacks Israel; or when he attacks Jews, whose role as merchant and landlord to the blacks has long diminished. However, it is apparent that many blacks, like many whites, are relatively indifferent to these attacks on Israel or the Jews, which they do not yet share.

Of course, "indifference" in this case has two faces, both of which relate directly, if separately, to the Farrakhan factor. It has been pointed out that the most effective politicians of bigotry have married their bigotry with a program addressed to the legitimate, urgent and unmet needs of a large sector of the population. The American black population has such needs; and a feeling that there has been a growing indifference to them in the American society.

It is true that much progress can be brought into evidence. A quarter of a century ago, the percentage of blacks

registered to vote in eleven southern states was less than half that of the whites; today, the percentages are about even. There are five times as many elected black officials. A substantial black middle class has emerged in that period. Whereas about one out of ten blacks were in white collar occupations then, now there are about four out of ten. Then, about four out of ten blacks aged 25 to 29 had graduated from high school; today, the figure is eight out of ten.

But there are other statistics. About three out of ten blacks live below our official poverty level, as measured by money income. If all government aid is counted, that figure drops by half; but money income is, after all, the mark of economic independence. And, by either measure, the proportion of blacks living in poverty is about three times greater than that of the whites. Related is the fact that the median income of black households is little more than half that of white households- about the same proportion as obtained two decades ago. And the black unemployment rate remains at least twice higher than that of whites.

It is also true, in this schizoid situation, that the average income of young husband-and-wife black families approaches that of similar white families. That indicates the radical effort our society has made to excise overt economic discrimination, all other things being equal. But all other things are not equal. About four out of ten black

families are not headed by a married couple but by a female householder; as compared with about one out of ten white families. And, for the general population, the average income of a female household, with husband absent is about one third that of either a female or male householder with spouse present.

That objective situation for the black population is worsening. In the last fifteen years the percentage of white female households has risen only slightly, while the percentage of black female households has risen half again. Among blacks, more than half of all births are to women without husbands. Schizoid it may be, but the economic conditions for a significant sector of the black population remain disastrous and not subject to easy remedy. Most important, there is a pervasive black perception that the rest of the American society doesn't care that much anymore. That perception, however imperfect, has fattened on the changed political rhetoric in this country: from social change to budget control; from affirmative action hard-ball to routine non-discrimination.

A recent study by the University of Michigan documented the swift progress that recent Southeast Asian refugees have made in this country. They came in poverty, with little education, few transferable skills, and almost no proficiency in English. In five years, their unemployment rate was lower

and the educational attainment of their children higher than that of the blacks. A differing social situation is obviously in operation for the American blacks; but it is a social situation which they still see, with much justice, as the hand-made creation of the American society. The least they expect, then, from this society is some caring- but instead they see a great gulf of indifference.

The indifference to political bigotry, wedded to such frustration, comprises the Farrakhan Factor- which in other circumstances might be named the Kahane Factor; or, indeed, named after any political demagogue who knows the value of the Poisoned Good. Of course, the only thing assuredly "good" about these political programs is their concern with unmet human problems: hunger, war, oppression, social immobility. The proposed political remedies may not be "good" at all. Many would find Farrakhan's proposed remedies for American black problems puerile and delusory. But that's a matter for separate political debate and beside the point. He is addressing himself to legitimate and urgent problems, and that's the attractive good which he is unalterably poisoning with his genophobia.

So it is not so much Farrakhan as the indifference to his bigotry (or anyone else's) which is dangerous. There are a number of factors sustaining this public indifference, but not the least of them is its toleration by some reputable

and responsible black leaders. The Farrakhan factor, if it is not specifically rejected by black leadership, could serve to create a special dimension of anti-semitism among the black rank and file, where it does not exist today; and a special dimension of anti-Israelism among the black rank and file, where it does not exist today. The latter is probably the most dangerous. The fulcrum of any serious American anti-semitism in the foreseeable future will probably be resistance to support of Israel, accompanied by continuing American Jewish efforts on behalf of Israel.

We seem a long way from any pervasive anti-Israel feeling, but we cannot discount the possible effects of the continuing American budget crunch, in association with the massive economic needs of Israel. And we cannot discount the possible effect of a series of frustrating American experiences abroad- in the style of the TWA hostage crisis rather than the more unusual Achille Lauro crisis- in feeding a withdrawal impulse in America. And in such circumstances, the Farrakhan factor, if black leaders allow it to play itself out, could create a special black role in negatively skewing the American political scene on Israel.

The most immediate puzzlement is why so many black leaders qualify their rejection of Farrakhan- in effect legitimating indifference to the bigoted element in his Poisoned Good. Most mainstream black leaders are not notably anti-semitic

or anti-Israel. In point is the fact that the black congressional caucus, out of solid black constituencies, remains the most staunch body of support for Israel aid in Congress, outside of the body of Jewish Congressmen.

Beyond that, most black political leaders are not enchanted with Farrakhan's growing public prominence, or his possible ascension to a role which many of them would prefer to have themselves. In very private conversations, they express their thorough uneasiness about the Muslim minister. But many of them will not thoroughly reject Farrakhan publicly. Why?

There is a great deal of frustration in their toleration. There is frustration at America's perceived indifference and inability to handle some of the current difficult problems of the black community. There is frustration at their own inability to find solutions. There is frustration that the black population has not been organized effectively enough as a political force. Against the background of such frustration, it is a temptation not to call off a stalking horse like Farrakhan, who has the capability to rouse. In that sense, they are displaying an indifference of their own to the consequences of the Poisoned Good.

But there is always something more, in the realm of practical politics. Especially since Farrakhan makes such a

point of Jewish domination, few black leaders want to give the impression that they are the first to cave in to Jewish pressure, and abandon the primacy of black concerns. Typically, a Southern California NAACP leader is quoted as saying, "The black leadership, and rightly so, is not interested in being dictated to by the Jewish leadership as to when and if they repudiate Louis Farrakhan."

But if Farrakhan lives by media attention, which is fed by black/Jewish confrontation, then the thing to do is to minimize such confrontation. If most black leadership is adverse to the idea of Farrakhan becoming a prime black leader, it would seem that their goals in that regard correspond to those of the Jewish community. Every apprentice in the field of Jewish community relations knows how obvious those strategic precepts are. But why doesn't it seem to work out that way?

In Baltimore, in September, it did appear to work out that way. When Farrakhan was invited by the students of Morgan State University, separate trumpets were blown by neither the Jewish nor black community. A standing group of black and Jewish leaders did have a joint press conference to state that his bigotry had no place in Baltimore. The same group issued a statement after he left, deploring his bigotry. (They issued a similar joint statement when Kahane came to Baltimore). There was no sense of Jewish pressure on

black public figures, no dramatic confrontation, little public apologia for Farrakhan by mainstream black leaders or sensational media attention.

That was in marked contrast with the the Los Angeles and New York experiences last Fall. In New York, Mayor Koch opened with a singular blast against Farrakhan as "a Nazi in clerical garb." A week later, he did join a group of blacks and whites who expressed public opposition to Farrakhan's bigotry. But the statements of some of the black leaders quoted by the media fairly dripped with political defensiveness and Poisoned Good ambivalence. In Los Angeles, the controversy was cast from the beginning as a black/Jewish confrontation, and the duplicating machines of the Jewish agencies ran apace. A black politician in the Los Angeles area, a city councilman, put the black perception in this capsule in the Los Angeles Times:

"The issue is not anti-semitism or bigotry. The issue for everyone is the right to self-determination...I don't agree with the arrogant and heavy-handed way in which the Jewish community handled this incident...If black men and women in their uphill struggle for equality continue to be dictated to by others regarding what they do, what they say and when they say it, we will forever be slaves and never our own masters."

The Baltimore model is not one that will travel easily to all communities. Black politics is not the same in New York, Washington or Los Angeles as it is in Baltimore. Neither is Jewish community politics. The Baltimore model might not even work that neatly in Baltimore next time around, in different circumstances (e.g. Hurricane Gloria accompanied Farrakhan to Baltimore). However, the relative success of the Baltimore model was instructive.

But that strategy will work only raggedly in some places, and too shallowly in all places if the Jewish community, to begin with, does not more widely recognize that the problem is not Farrakhan; the problem is the Farrakhan Factor. Many American Jews have developed certain simplistic and narrow tendencies in their approach to Jewish "defense" and public affairs, which limit their ability to handle the Farrakhan Factor.

It is simplistic to believe that the first line of defense against that sort of thing is Jewish outrage. Perhaps some of the recent flood of Holocaust education and literature have nourished the mistaken perception that Jewish outrage, in itself, could have fended off Hitler. Perhaps some recent successes in the nation's capitol have developed an outsized image of the power of Jewish sentiment in itself. Outrage must certainly be present—but it is not a program.

A comprehensive program against the Farrakhan Factor- and thus against Farrakhan- is identical with the program against political anti-semitism. It starts, for example, with an active Jewish concern about the strength of the common public schools, and about what is taught there. It starts with a broader understanding of the nature of the Holocaust. It starts with a broader involvement of the Jewish community in the affairs of the nation. It includes Jewish efforts to dispel the black perception of American indifference to their problems.

Unfortunately, Farrakhan's personal presence has aggravated contrary and narrowing tendencies within the Jewish community. The idea has been circulated that it is time to write off the black community as a political ally; that nothing remains of that alliance but liberal nostalgia. But even if we had no alliance, we would have a stake in reducing black, as well as other substantial alienation in our society. That may not be an alliance, but it is at least an operable common interest. And there is a difference between having remedial differences and abandoning the fray altogether.

The campaign against Farrakhan himself is, of course, part of any program conducted against the Farrakhan Factor- but only part of it, and to be effective, must be consistent with

the principles of the larger program. The tactics in dealing with Farrakhan will of course be circumstantial; that is what tactics are all about. But certain guidelines are constant.

To begin with, no apologia, no off-hand dismissal of the anti-semitic poison in the Poisoned Good, no "partial acceptance" of Farrakhan is acceptable. That's the heart of the matter. The immediate goal is to bring local black leadership to this understanding- but that will not best be done with overt Jewish pressure, or two weeks before the Muslim minister arrives. It will best be done on the basis of a common fear of the Farrakhan Factor, a common interest in some of America's social problems, and a joint statement. On the other hand, there is no reason in the world to expect the Jewish community to be friendly to politicians who, understanding the logic of the position, apologize for Farrakhan.

And, in any case, the Jewish community must resist any mood of indifference to the urgent needs of the American blacks. It would be the final irony if Farrakhan caused American Jews to further withdraw, and to abandon an essential part of their fight against the Farrakhan Factor.