

The Jewish Community as a Political Football

As a result of the recent violence by members of the African-American community against Jews in the United States, the internet and a host of websites have ramped up their debate as to who is more to blame: Is it the right wing? The left wing? White nationalists or African-Americans?

My view, not often heard in the daily din of internet nonsense, is that it does not matter a tinker's dam! Bigotry is bigotry, and every element of society has an obligation to teach tolerance.

The history of minority groups picking on one another, while the majority oftentimes marginalizes all minorities, is nothing new. As Irish and Italian immigrants came to our shores, they fought with one another, disagreed with the African-American community, and expressed their hostility to American Jews. Never mind that Jews arrived on our continent when New York was still New Amsterdam, fought bravely in the American Revolution, and served this country in the War of 1812 and right up through present conflicts. There will always be those who feed on suspicion, ignorance and untruthful stereotypes.

Unfortunately, the hostility between African-Americans and the Jewish community, as well as eras of cooperation are easy to identify. Everyone knows about the great assistance the Jewish community provided to African-Americans during the civil rights years. Likewise, most African-Americans know that Martin Luther King was a strong supporter of the Jewish community, Zionism and the State of Israel. The Jewish community had few friends in the African-American community more important and more influential than the great Martin Luther King. Likewise, when African-Americans struggled to be accepted in White society, Jews of every stripe, denomination and political affiliation supported the African-American community. Even Judah Benjamin, who ultimately became Vice President of the Confederacy, tried to resolve the Civil War by suggesting that slaves who fought for the South would be freed. Jefferson Davis's cabinet was not open to that prospect. In fact, secret negotiations between Lincoln and Davis to end the Civil War took place between Lincoln's personal physician, who was Jewish, and Judah Benjamin.

One reason that Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation when he did was to secure support from the Black community for Northern goals in the Civil War.

Unfortunately, relationships between the African-American community and the Jewish community were not always tranquil. In 1935, and again in 1943, African-American riots in Harlem drove the Jewish community out of that part of New York. Since the Rieders family was from upper Broadway, my father spoke bitterly of having to leave and move to Washington Heights as a result of those riots. Historians have been reluctant to call

what occurred in those years pogroms against the Jews, but that is precisely what they were.

The 1960s saw most members of the Jewish community supportive of Black aspirations to vote, be accepted in society and have an equal education. Debates over Affirmative Action split the communities once again. When African-Americans were admitted to universities and colleges, who would not otherwise have been qualified, it was generally Jewish attendees who were most affected. Most members of the Jewish community accepted their degraded status by pointing out that since 1911, colleges and universities in American had quotas on the number of Jewish students they would accept. When those quotas were quietly terminated, the schools instead instituted "geographic" quotas. Since most Jewish-Americans lived in the big cities, this once again had the obvious effect of discriminating against the Jewish community.

Some recent high-profile criminals have been identified as Jews. The Jewish community is rightly embarrassed and disgraced by these people, and has spoken very publicly about the need to enforce Jewish values among our children. Every community needs to be embarrassed, outraged and disgraced when one of its members misbehaves in a way that damages society or relationships between constituencies within our great Republic.

It is time for the Jewish community no longer to be a political football, but rather to be accepted as legitimate members of society.

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