

The “Black-Jewish Coalition” Unraveled: Where Does Israel Fit?

A Master’s Thesis

Presented to

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Professors Ellen Smith and Jonathan Krasner Ph.D., Advisors

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The “Black-Jewish Coalition” Unraveled: Where Does Israel Fit?

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Brandeis University  
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Fascination with the famed “Black-Jewish coalition” in the United States, whether real or imaginary, is hardly a new phenomenon of academic interest. Much has been written on the complex, ever-evolving web of reciprocity that once characterized this strategic partnership along the liberal-left spectrum. However, the current trend of inter-community distance and at times, disdain, between white Jews and Black non-Jews points to a tragic divorce with shared interests long diverged. But how did we get here? While race and class remain the primary points of group departure, I argue that Israel and Zionism’s role in the American Jewish consciousness created under-examined flashpoints of tension. Their complication of Jewish identity, interests, and allegiances mounted Black-Jewish friction and served to solidify the ever-expanding divide.

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## Introduction

Fascination with the famed “Black-Jewish alliance” in the United States, whether real or imaginary, is hardly a new phenomenon of academic interest. Much has been written on the complex, ever-evolving web of reciprocity that once characterized this strategic partnership along the liberal-left spectrum.<sup>1</sup> However, the current trend of inter-community distance and at times, disdain, between white Jews and Black non-Jews<sup>2</sup> points to a tragic divorce with shared interests long diverged. But how did we get here? This thesis accepts as a basic premise that, above all else, the primary point of group departure was the de-racialization of white American Jews over the course of the 20th century and the subsequent class mobility that access to whiteness engendered. However, I argue that Israel and Zionism’s role in the American Jewish consciousness created under-examined flashpoints of tension. These entities’ complication of Jewish identity, interests, and allegiances mounted Black-Jewish friction and served to solidify the ever-expanding divide.

## Naming and Definitions

It is worth stating clearly from the outset that I reject “Ashkenormativity” in the Jewish community, a system that elevates white Ashkenazi Jewish identity as the default against which

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Black-Jewish relations more generally, explore the writings of Cheryl Greenberg, Hasia Diner, Karen Brodtkin Sacks, Eric Goldstein, Jonathan Kaufman, Irving Howe, Clayborne Carson, Harold Cruse, Taylor Branch, Murray Friedman, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, Deborah Dash Moore, and Cornel West, to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to capitalize the “B” in Black and de-capitalize the “w” in white. In the words of “radical copy editor,” Alex Kapitan, “General editorial standards of consistency may call for equal treatment when it comes to the words Black and white, but until equal treatment exists in our larger society, calls for equal treatment in language only serve to whitewash cultural context, identity, and history.” For more on writing standards, de-centering whiteness, and similar norms in the Black press, explore <https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2016/09/21/black-with-a-capital-b/>.

all other Jewish identities are measured. I recognize and affirm the richness of Black and Arab Jewish identities that are unjustly invisibilized by the primacy of the white Ashkenazi experience. I unequivocally support community efforts to uplift and amplify marginalized Jewish narratives for the sake of equity in Jewish communal spaces. However, for the purposes of this particular analysis, “Jews” hereafter *do* refer strictly to white Ashkenazi Jews, as their voices and dollars dominated the American Jewish landscape throughout the 20th century. Likewise, “Black” and “Arab” refer to those of non-Jewish communities. Similarly, while women have always played unseen, yet critical roles in shaping their communities and group consciousness, this work is largely androcentric in order to uncover the historical conversation between those with the most *material power* to shape the discourse.

Readers will also notice that much attention is given to the radical Black left that is not given to the radical Jewish left. This difficult choice is attributed to the fact that Black leftist organizations and leaders had much more influence over Black consciousness than did radical Jewish ones. For example, it is likely that all Americans, regardless of educational background, recognize the name “Black Panthers.” By contrast, few American Jews, (much less average Americans) have ever heard of leftist organizations like The New Jewish Agenda<sup>3</sup> or Jews for Urban Justice.<sup>4</sup> In light of this discrepancy, I have chosen to zoom in on the largest, most influential Jewish voices in my analysis of the Black-Jewish relationship as it pertains to Zionism and the State of Israel.

It is also worth noting that, while the word “terrorist” has always been used subjectively, in a post 9/11 world, it has been abused and inappropriately applied to serve xenophobic and

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<sup>3</sup> The New Jewish Agenda was a multi-issue progressive Jewish membership organization active in the United States between 1980 and 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Jews for Urban Justice was a leftist Jewish organization founded in 1966 to oppose anti-Black racism in the Jewish community.

racist ends. I appreciate the implications of employing this term, and I hope I have done so responsibly. I also honor the fact that the land in question is porous in contour and name. Whether through violence, divine providence, or international dissensus, one person's Israel is another's Palestine, and vice versa. With full recognition that the choice to name is a political one of tremendous import, this thesis understands the land within pre-1967 borders as Israel, and the West Bank as "occupied territory."

Lastly, a few words of clarification on Zionism. Zionism has never been a monolithic movement or ideology. Originating in Europe under the conditions of rampant antisemitism, Zionism evolved to be a heterogeneous ideological movement with diverging principles, diametrically opposed figure-heads, and drastically different trajectories in the United States and Israel. Whatever dictionary definitions or ideological think-pieces exist on Zionism, popular consciousness among contemporary American Jews suggests that Zionism is the "Jewish right to self-determination." This notion is evident in a 2005 joint statement on discrimination to the United Nations submitted by the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations<sup>5</sup> and the preeminent Jewish service organization, B'nai B'rith.<sup>6</sup> Their statement reads,

*"Denying the Jewish people their basic human rights, including the right to self-determination, is anti-Semitism. This basic right is fulfilled by the existence of the State of Israel. It is protected and advanced by the political movement to guarantee Jewish self-determination – Zionism."*<sup>7</sup>

When refracted through the lens of average American Jews, this thesis makes room for a self-determination-centered definition. However, my primary definition orients around a more

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<sup>5</sup> The Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations was founded in 1947 to serve the United Nations as an advisory board for Jewish organizations in all parts of the world.

<sup>6</sup> B'nai B'rith International is a renowned Jewish service organization founded in 1843. Its contemporary mission states a commitment to the continuity and safety of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, *Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination*, E/CN.4/2005/NGO/344, (18 March 2005), available from <https://undocs.org/E/CN.4/2005/NGO/344>.



literal understanding of Zionism as the right to establish a Jewish nation-state in the land of Israel. Given that Zionists fall on a continuum of their preferred borders for such a state, defining those borders in order to more narrowly define Zionism is not necessary here. With that working definition in mind, the following historical review and contemporary analysis maintains that anti-Zionism, in this case, *opposition to a Jewish nation-state in the land of Israel*, can be, but is not *inherently* antisemitism. However slowly this argument may be growing in popularity, it has been emphatically rejected by many American Jews for decades. This attitude is encapsulated in a 1970 *New York Times* article in which Associate Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress,<sup>8</sup> Richard Cohen, is quoted saying, “we don’t think there is any valid or real difference between anti-Israel sentiment and antisemitism. Anti-Zionism is a cover for antisemitism.”<sup>9</sup> Even as of 2020, the World Jewish Congress,<sup>10</sup> an international representative body of world Jewry, has a section of its website titled “Anti-Zionism = Antisemitism.”<sup>11</sup>

The disentangling of anti-Zionism and antisemitism can indeed be challenging and requires further clarification. At times, people replace “Jew” with “Zionist” as a sort of obfuscating get-out-of-antisemitism-free card, as illustrated in an issue of the Black Panther’s weekly newspaper, in which Jewish slumlords were referred to as “racist Zionists.”<sup>12</sup> This is a clear line crossed from anti-Zionism to antisemitism. Zionism, having no bearing on racist housing practices perpetrated by Jews, has been inappropriately employed to denigrate them. By

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<sup>8</sup> The American Jewish Congress was founded in 1918 to defend Jewish interests through public policy and advocacy by using diplomacy, legislation, and the courts.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Charlton, “Jews Fear Anti-Zionism of New Left,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/08/14/archives/jews-fear-antizionism-of-new-left-us-jews-fear-antizionism-of-new.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Established in Geneva, Switzerland in 1936, the World Jewish Congress is an international federation of Jewish communities from over one hundred countries.

<sup>11</sup> “Antisemitism: Issues,” World Jewish Congress, accessed March 2020, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/issues/combating-anti-semitism>.

<sup>12</sup> Charlton, “Jews Fear Anti-Zionism of New Left.”

contrast, some of the more judicious and issue-appropriate anti-Zionist critiques permeating leftist discourse, assert that the State of Israel was founded through mass displacement of the local Palestinian Arab population. The documented historical evidence supporting those accusations, (many of which can be found in Israel's own archives)<sup>13</sup> do not, according to my definition, render such manifestations of anti-Zionism as antisemitic.

Having established this operational framework, this thesis will zoom in on the evolution of American Zionism, as Zionist values were once a driving force behind Jewish participation in domestic racial justice work. Eventually, however, the Zionist movement became a point of bitter contention between white Jews and Black non-Jews, chipping away at the relationship for decades to come.

### **Zionism and American Jewry**

In the 1950's, American Jews faced a number of critical questions that threatened the fabric of Jewish unity. Few dilemmas created such rifts as the degree to which Jews should demonstrate public solidarity with African Americans undergoing systematic political, economic, and social oppression.<sup>14</sup> The extent to which Jews extended their energies beyond their own interests was often shaped by their understanding of what it meant to be a Jew. Informed by many of the justice values of the prophetic Jewish tradition and a sense of shared vulnerability, major Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee,<sup>15</sup> the American

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<sup>13</sup> Simha Flapan, "The Palestinian Exodus of 1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 77. **Note:** Staub's work provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of Jewish liberalism in America. As such, this thesis relies heavily on his thought leadership and analysis of American Jewish organizations and public opinion.

<sup>15</sup> The American Jewish Committee is a Jewish advocacy and civil rights organization established in 1906.

Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)<sup>16</sup> joined others in providing extensive financial and legal support to Black organizations fighting for racial justice.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting, however, that this support sometimes came with a heavy dose of paternalism and disproportionate control to set the priorities for the struggle.<sup>18</sup> The looming threat of potential Jewish withdrawal of monetary and political support had consequences on Black leadership and their autonomy to determine and act within their own interests.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, these Jewish organizations were motivated by a heightened fear of antisemitism and a sense of shared enemies with Black communities. These included white supremacists, agents of the Red Scare, and a general sense that whatever state apparatuses and institutions would deny basic liberties to Black people were never too far off from restricting Jews, if they hadn't already historically done so. Despite the loose consensus among the largest representative Jewish institutions about the imperative of Jewish anti-racist work, Jewish organizations sparred over the proper tactics that would allow for support while protecting the community from antisemitic backlash.<sup>20</sup> By this point, much of the American political imagination considered civil rights activism to be linked to communism, and communism linked to Jews. In the height of McCarthyist red-baiting, and in light of the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage, Jews were on red alert.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The Anti-Defamation League is an international Jewish NGO established in 1913 to fight antisemitism and all forms of bigotry.

<sup>17</sup> Cheryl Greenberg, "Negotiating Coalition: Black and Jewish Civil Rights Agencies in the Twentieth Century," in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997), 154.

<sup>18</sup> Greenberg, "Negotiating Coalition," 140.

<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, "Negotiating Coalition," 140.

<sup>20</sup> Cheryl Greenberg, "The Southern Jewish Community and the Struggle for Civil Rights," in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict*, ed. V.P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold M. Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 146.

<sup>21</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 23.

Zionist leaders inside and outside major Jewish organizations faced ideological predicaments about their active and public support for the civil rights movement. While 21st century American Zionism is exclusively concerned with Israel-specific affairs, the Zionism of the 1950's was fluid and expansive in scope, with many of its leaders loudly professing their solidarity with Black people.<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding the unconditional support of groups like Socialist Zionist *Hashomer Hatzair*,<sup>23</sup> mainstream Jewish organizations had to contend with reconciling a Zionist agenda with non-Zionist interests like civil rights. In 1956, former president of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA)<sup>24</sup> and then president of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Israel Goldstein, stressed that “the fulfillment of the American dream” and “the fulfillment of the Zionist dream” could not be divorced from the “problem affecting the Negro.”<sup>25</sup> He went on to explicitly critique members of the American Jewish establishment whom he believed turned their backs on the plight of the oppressed, claiming “we must defend the rights of the Negro *as zealously as we would defend our rights as Jews* whenever and wherever these might be threatened” (emphasis mine).<sup>26</sup>

Driven by its Eastern European immigrant flare, the American Jewish Congress was the most fervently Zionist among Jewish defense organizations, and their Zionist agenda was inextricably linked to Black freedom. According to Will Maslow, the famed attorney for the Congress, this feeling of mutual responsibility between Zionists and Black people extended to Israel affairs. Maslow wrote in the 1950's that the “Arab-Israeli conflict” had no substantial impact on Black-Jewish relations, despite “Arab propagandists who sought to enroll Negro

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<sup>22</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Hashomer Hatzair is a Socialist Zionist youth movement founded in Galicia, Austria-Hungary in 1913.

<sup>24</sup> Established in 1897, the Zionist Organization of America was the first official Zionist entity established in the United States.

<sup>25</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 49.

leaders on the side of the ‘coloured’ Arabs ‘struggling against white Jewish invaders’.”<sup>27</sup> He noted that while there were “occasional indications of sympathy in the Negro press for Arabs resisting ‘colonial’ oppression, there has been surprisingly little anti-Israel sentiment in the influential Negro weekly press. On the contrary, outstanding Negro publicists have expressed admiration for the gallant efforts of tiny Israel to forge a democratic nation in the Middle East.”<sup>28</sup>

While liberal Jews and mainstream Black organizations maintained strategic relations for years to come, the anti-Zionist undertones of Black radicalism were already taking shape in the 1950’s through the teachings of Malcolm X. As dictated by the Nation of Islam, his religious and political philosophies encouraged a deliberate reclamation of African identity.<sup>29</sup> His Black Muslim pan-Africanism disrupted the “Judeo-Christian” discursive agreement that theologically united Black people and Jews in the liberal civil rights camp. But his identity-building project was otherwise non-threatening to American Jews, and was transformative for the Black community.<sup>30</sup> Rejecting Christianity, Malcolm purported that “Christians and colonialists talked the same way, and that Islam, as the religion of many colonized people, may also be a way of talking about revolution.”<sup>31</sup> Having emerged contemporaneously with the era of decolonization in Africa and Asia in the 1950’s, Malcolm X’s internationalist emphasis paved the way for the nascent Black Power movement’s global solidarity ethos that would ultimately implicate Israel as a colonialist entity. Personal visits with then Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser, future

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<sup>27</sup> Will Maslow, “My Brother’s Keeper: Negro-Jewish Relations in the United States,” *World Jewry: A Monthly Review* No. 2 Vol. 1 (April 1958), page 6, Folder 001486-028-0001 Papers of the NAACP, Part 24: Special Subjects, 1956-1965, Brandeis University Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Maslow, “My Brother’s Keeper,” 5.

<sup>29</sup> Annalisa Jabaily, “1967: How Estrangement and Alliances between Blacks, Jews, and Arabs Shaped a Generation of Civil Rights Family Values,” *Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, Volume 23, Issue 1, Article 5, (2005): 210.

<sup>30</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 210.

<sup>31</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 210.

president Anwar Sadat, and former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Palestinian leader Hajj Amin al-Huseini,<sup>32</sup> concretized Malcolm X's belief that "a white imperialist world was locked in a struggle with a larger Black world combating racism and foreign domination."<sup>33</sup> As part of his internationalist worldview, he drew direct lines of interconnected oppression between American Black people and the Palestinian Arabs. In an interview with C. Eric Lincoln, Malcolm X claimed,

*"The Jews, with the help of Christians in America and Europe, drove our Muslim brothers out of their homeland where they had settled for centuries and took over land for themselves...In America, the Jews sap the very life-blood of the so-called Negroes to maintain the State of Israel. This every Black man resents. Israel is just an international poor house which is maintained by money sucked from the poor suckers in America."*<sup>34</sup>

He also suggested that Israel's support of newly independent African nations was merely an extension of its flare for deceit and expertise in what he called "dollarism: the ability to come posing as a friend and benefactor bearing gifts and all other forms of technical aid," a camouflaged colonialism of benevolence that replaces force and fear with dangling money.<sup>35</sup> Entanglement of antisemitic conspiracies of Jewish control in America and anti-Zionist critiques of Israeli aggression abroad would continue to permeate the discourse among Black radicals for decades to follow, with a marked uptick after the Six Day War. (See discussion of this phenomenon in Chapter 1.) This hostile tension was not one directional, however. For American Jews, the intensifying bifurcation of Zionist interests and the Black struggle that had

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<sup>32</sup> Husseini was a highly controversial figure, as he was a known supporter of Nazi Germany and ally to Adolf Hitler.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine: Transnational Countries of Color* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 12. **Note:** While much has been written about Jewish-Black relations in general, Fischbach's work is the first major comprehensive historical overview of Israel's role in that dynamic. As such, this thesis relies heavily on his thought leadership. As of yet, I am unaware of any new scholarship in conversation with or in opposition to Fishbach, so the conversation may shift as new academic works emerge.

<sup>34</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Malcolm X, "Zionist Logic," *Egyptian Gazette*, (1964).

characterized the liberal-left organizational and communal attitudes of 1950's eventually reached its boiling point.

In June 1967, Israel arose victorious from the rubble of a multi-pronged battle fought along each of its borders. Israel expanded its borders, conquering the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights after only six days of warfare. This unprecedented military triumph had worldwide implications on the Jewish psyche. The aftermath of the war revolutionized the American Jewish community and fundamentally recast Zionist priorities away from its liberal and left-leaning origins, toward aggressive particularism. No longer cast in the light of eternal victimhood, Israel, and by extension, the Jewish people writ large, emerged a fearsome entity not to be tested by their enemies.<sup>36</sup> Norman Podhoretz, editor of the American Jewish Committee's *Commentary* magazine, wrote in 1967 that the full scale transformation in American Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Six Day War "represented the recovery, after a long and uncertain convalescence of the Jewish remnant from the grievous and nearly fatal psychic and spiritual wounds suffered at the hands of the Nazis."<sup>37</sup> Rabbi, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, Emil Fackheim, wrote in 1968 that after Auschwitz, the Jew was "forbidden to sacrifice Jewish existence on the altar of future humanity."<sup>38</sup> Should the Jew find a gun in his hand facing an armed adversary, "he might wish to idealistically heed all sorts of advice from his progressive friends, but should not allow himself to be shot for the good of humanity...he will shoot first, but with tears in his eyes."<sup>39</sup> This sentiment characterized a sort of new Zionist theology, one that awakened swaths of American Jews from the slumber of assimilation, and rehierarchalized the imperative of Jewish survival. Perhaps most importantly, the war

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<sup>36</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 130.

<sup>38</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 139.

<sup>39</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 140.

galvanized average American Jews to once again conceptualize themselves as members of a people, rather than merely individuals who subscribe to a religious tradition.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout American history, Jews have held a range of self-understood identities along a spectrum of peoplehood, ethnicity, and religion. These shifts in group identity have been largely shaped by external forces, and were strategic rhetorical avenues to avoid antisemitism.<sup>41</sup>

The 1967 war reconstituted American Jewry under “peoplehood” and a worldwide Jewish nationalism, as expressed in *The Village Voice* wherein a young Jewish woman wrote,

*“I think it must have been this way for many of my generation, that the Israel-Arab collision was a moment of truth...For the first time, I knew what it was to be us against the killers. Us. Two weeks ago, Israel was they, now Israel is we. I will never kid myself that we are only the things we choose to be. Roots count.”*<sup>42</sup>

The war represented a global Jewish reckoning and recovery from the psychological terror inflicted from the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup> This was a point of tremendous unification of American Jewry. But it also meant that any deemphasis on Zionism in favor of the Black struggle signaled a turning away from one’s people, a sort of self-hatred or denial of one’s right to Jewish difference.<sup>44</sup> After the war, one’s choice to center civil rights issues at the expense of Jewish and Zionist particularism was, according to many in the American Jewish mainstream, a “pitiful attempt of those who tried to assimilate to a world which mythologically rejects them by linking arms with Negroes in protest and demonstrations.”<sup>45</sup> According to these Jewish thinkers, of which there were many, young Jewish leftists who looked away from Zionism toward domestic activism violated the post-Holocaust 614th commandment, a refusal to, as Emil Fackenheim first

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<sup>40</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 130.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 130.

<sup>44</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 118.

<sup>45</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 116.



called it, “hand Hitler a posthumous victory.”<sup>46</sup> Executive Vice President of the American Jewish Committee, Bertram Gold, once hypothesized that the willingness of young Jews to involve themselves in leftist struggles was due, in part, to a deficiency in their Judaism. That the Holocaust was not seared into their memory through embodied experience signaled that “on the whole, the young radicals don’t know what antisemitism is.”<sup>47</sup>

It was not only radical Jewish leftists who opposed the rise of a more militarized Jewish identity and spoke out against the territorial spoils of the Six Day War. Jewish theologian, Steven Schwartzchild of the American Jewish Congress, felt that Zionism should have been a collective endeavor to “test and incarnate Jewish values on the soil of Israel,” a project he believed was undermined by the occupation of new territory and its tempting the Jews to morph into “the natural men of new Fascism.”<sup>48</sup> Schwartzchild was one of the few Jewish leaders at the time, particularly in the mainstream, who publicly probed and mandated that Jews reckon with newly attained Jewish power in a Jewishly ethical way. He pushed Jews to consider whether or not, in the words of Ellen Willis, “in its determination to survive, Israel will lose its reason for being.”<sup>49</sup> Despite these dissenting attitudes, most organizational agendas operated from the premise of unwavering Israel support as the default priority. As Fackenheim once wrote, “one could only be an authentic witness to Harlem<sup>50</sup> and Vietnam if also a witness to Warsaw and Jerusalem.”<sup>51</sup>

Most indicative of the ‘67 sea-change in American Judaism was the rise of a trifurcated radical Jewish youth culture that reawakened ethnic identity and reinvigorated Jewish life. One

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<sup>46</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Charlton, “Jews Fear Anti-Zionism of New Left.”

<sup>48</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 137.

<sup>49</sup> Ellen Willis, “The Myth of the Powerful Jew,” in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1994), 203.

<sup>50</sup> Harlem was the site of many race-based uprisings by the Black community in the 1960’s.

<sup>51</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 140.

small but influential group became armed right-wing Zionist militants, like Rabbi Meir Kahane and those of his Jewish Defense League.<sup>52</sup> Others became left-leaning Zionist activists who targeted the Jewish establishment directly for its failure to meet the spiritual and educational needs of Jewish youth. The third group were conventional New Leftists, fully immersed in broad political organizing outside the Jewish community -- fighting for civil rights, the women's movement, the student movement, the anti-war movement, etc. And many young American Jews were an overlap between the latter two -- in attitudes, priorities, and tactics.

Each of the aforementioned groups were shaped by general trends of American counterculture. All three vehemently rejected what they understood as American Jewish accommodation to Christian norms and middle class consumer culture as a misguided path to Jewish freedom.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, they widely embraced the popular use of direct action and public protest as the preferred method of raising their collective voice in opposition.

This emergence of Zionist youth activity stood in stark contrast to the communal and political priorities of what I'd call "establishment Zionists" in the board rooms of major Jewish institutions. Deeply influenced by the zeitgeist of revolution, the anti-war movement, and the observable impact of "Black pride" on Black identity, these youth activists breathed new life into what they perceived to be a spiritually deadened community. They organized around (counter-culture-inspired) religious commitment, ethnic pride, and Zionism as the embodied vision of a liberated Jewry and path to self-determination.<sup>54</sup> The consolidation of these values is encapsulated in the founding manifesto of the Radical Zionist Alliance:

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<sup>52</sup> The Jewish Defense League was founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1968 as a religious-political organization to defend Jews from antisemitism "by whatever means necessary." It was classified as a terrorist group by the FBI in 2001.

<sup>53</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 199.

<sup>54</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 200.

*“North American Jews are a marginal people in a society of economic, political, and cultural oppression. The Jewish community has adopted a tradition of ignoring its own needs and has structured itself in an undemocratic manner geared toward assimilation and disappearance as a functioning nation. We call for the liberation of the Jewish people and the restructuring of our people’s existence in such a way to facilitate self-determination and development of our own institutions so as to control our destiny as a nation.”*<sup>55</sup>

While some of these activists eventually became enemies of Black militants, Black Power rhetoric and symbolism (such as the appropriated “Black Power fist”) undeniably shaped their Zionism, modeling the expansive possibilities of what it means to take responsibility for liberating one’s own people. Young rabbi and movement leader, Hillel Levine, wrote in 1969 that “the Black awakening reminded us that the melting pot was a fool’s fantasy.”<sup>56</sup> This revelation that unapologetic reclamation of difference can empower the collective, illuminated the path for Jewish group pride, an embrace of Jewish distinctiveness, and renewed attention to the uniquely Jewish concerns that were critical to the Jewish future.

During this moment of frenzied political energy and rampant cultural change, many of these activists fused left-leaning Zionism and New Left ideologies, in that some radical Zionists understood Judaism, Zionism, and Israel to be more of a Middle Eastern culture than a European one. This enabled some to, as one youth activist put it, dispel the “humiliation of being a Jew in America and enjoy a natural affinity toward Israel, and thereby enjoy a natural affinity with the Third World.”<sup>57</sup> In fact, some who were both Zionists and New Leftists organized left-leaning organizations in support for Israel, such as the Youth Committee for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East at City College. Twenty-two year old founder, Josh Muravchik, theorized at the time that “anti-Israel new-leftism has become for many young Jews a modern means of

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<sup>55</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 200.

<sup>56</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 201.

<sup>57</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 203.

‘passing’,<sup>58</sup> echoing the widely held sentiment that an embrace of anti-Zionism is symptomatic of self-hatred. The complex character of this brief political moment where one could be a New Leftist and a Zionist is captured in the popular Zionist-New-Leftish slogan, “be a revolutionary in Zion and a Zionist in the revolution.”<sup>59</sup>

Beyond these points of ideological overlap, however, the primacy of a “Jewish struggle” became a point of philosophical division between the leftist Zionists and the New Left Jews. Eventually, many of the New Leftists were seen as complacent in assimilation for having woven Jewish interests with those of all oppressed peoples in cross-movement solidarity work. In fact, some radical Zionists turned leftist ideology *against* New Left Jews, suggesting instead they heed the lessons of the Black struggle and adopt a “healthful symbiotic link necessary between one’s ethnic consciousness and one’s political identity.”<sup>60</sup> This sentiment is reflected by SUNY-Albany student, M. Jay Rosenberg, in which he states,

*“[The New Left Jew] joins Black nationalist groups, not as a Jew but as a white man. He does not understand that his relevance to the Black struggle is as a Jew and a fellow victim of endless white exploitation. He can comprehend the Black struggle but only in the context of his own... From this point on I shall join no movement that does not accept and support my people’s struggle. If I must choose between the Jewish cause and the ‘progressive’ anti-Israel Students for a Democratic Society, I shall choose the Jewish cause. If there barricades are erected, I will fight as a Jew.”<sup>61</sup>*

For some New Leftists, Zionism *was* indeed a distraction from a multi-pronged effort to overthrow racial, class, and gender oppression. Non-Zionist New Left Jews like Los Angeles Free Press commentator, Ed Richer, felt that global antisemitism had coerced Jews into becoming proxies of the ruling elite, forcing them to compromise Jewish values and positioning

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<sup>58</sup> Charlton, “Jews Fear Anti-Zionism of New Left.”

<sup>59</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 203.

<sup>60</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 220.

<sup>61</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 209.

them in opposition to collective liberation for the oppressed peoples of the world.<sup>62</sup> According to Richer, Israel and Zionism had become “increasingly rightist, rigid, and racist” as it morphed into a “client of American Empire,” and he feared Israel would become another Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> Anti-Zionist and Jews for Urban Justice activist, Sharon Rose, pointed out what she and her peers understood to be the ideological inconsistency of “favoring disestablishmentarian religious liberty here [America] while defending the existence of a theocracy in the Middle East, of attesting to the survival of the Jewish people through two millenia of ‘dispersion’ from their homeland while denying the existence and rights of the Palestinian people after their twenty-five years or less as refugees.”<sup>64</sup> These young Jews believed that America “showed every sign of becoming an expert at genocide,” and unless they put a stop to it, there would be “no piece of real estate far enough away (Israel), no cave deep enough in the earth to protect any[one].”<sup>65</sup> Nodding to the sensitivities of Jews who increasingly feared the “rising tide of Black antisemitism,” Rose advocated fiercely for intercommunal solidarity, writing,

*“Organizing to help stop that genocide requires that we ally ourselves with brothers and sisters in the Black community who are organizing to prevent a race war in this country, and against whom the repression has already begun to be unleashed. Let us criticize them whenever they attempt to use antisemitism as a tool for organizing, but let us not allow that to put us in the position of defending unequivocally the foreign policy of any government (Israel).”*<sup>66</sup>

Other New Left Jews embraced Zionism with no ideological dissonance, holding strong to the belief that ethnic nationalism celebrated by the left should extend to Israel.<sup>67</sup> These New

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<sup>62</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 232.

<sup>63</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 232.

<sup>64</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 235.

<sup>65</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 236.

<sup>66</sup> Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 236.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Buhle and Robin D.G. Kelley, “Allies of a Different Sort: Jews and Blacks in the American Left,” in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1997) 215.

Left Zionists later found themselves nudged out of the revolutionary Black struggle, shifting the relationship between white Jews and Black people toward one of embittered hostility.

## Chapter 1

### Black Radicals & The Jews (1967-1979)

As the outcomes of the Six Day War began to ripple outward beyond the Jewish community and onto the international stage, the struggle for Black liberation assumed a new face in America. Particularist identity politics and revolutionary internationalism trumped the ethos of accommodationist, colorblind liberalism characterized by much of the civil rights movement. Unfortunately, it was the value system of the previous model, the *liberal* Black struggle, that had allowed for Jewish participation with no ideological contradictions. The liberal civil rights camp was shaped by a Christian posture, a commitment to “civil order,” a legitimization of and devotion to the state as a mechanism for change. Under the canopy of colorblindness, “neutral” norms such as merit, equal access, and equal treatment under the law were presumed to be the only legitimate antidote to racism. After all, those very legal channels, undergirded by the primacy of individual rights over group rights, had emancipated European Jewry and catapulted Jewish mobility and collective well-being in the United States.<sup>68</sup> According to the new popular consciousness of particularism, the logic of colorblindness requires marginalized groups “to

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<sup>68</sup> Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 167.

surrender to the standards of the dominant group, which the latter would complacently accept as a tribute to the universality of its own values,”<sup>69</sup> values that radicals found categorically objectionable and antithetical to liberation. This ideological chasm fundamentally disrupted the relationship between Black people and white Jews on the domestic front, with questions around Israel compounding intergroup tensions.

Black militants posed a direct threat to the ideological underpinnings of the liberal Black-Jewish coalition. They argued that racism is rooted in subordination rather than discrimination, and that true justice does not mean increasing access to power in an illegitimate system. Rather, true justice demands a dismantling of oppressive structures and a total redistribution of power. In other words, according to this vantage point, the “desire for admission to the colonists’ world only legitimized the colonial system.”<sup>70</sup> Black militants also rejected the notion of the “brother-sufferer,” of shared pain between Black people and Jews. According to renowned African American studies scholar, Harold Cruse, the brother-sufferer paradigm was “the result of Jewish intellectuals’ power to frame the agenda of racial justice for Blacks on their own terms from their position of social power.”<sup>71</sup> Other Black Power characteristics created distance from Jews in the civil rights camp. These include a growing Muslim presence in the movement, an affinity for armed struggle, support for Soviet-backed Third World revolutionary struggles, and an anti-capitalist, transnational orientation to the liberatory project.<sup>72</sup> The Black Power movement also adopted an ethic of racial separatism and ousted white people from their organizations. They demanded Black control over all aspects of Black liberation, and that white allies take full

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Feher, “The Schisms of ‘67: On Certain Restructurings of the American Left, from the Civil Rights Movement to the Multiculturalist Constellation,” in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1994), 267.

<sup>70</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 203.

<sup>71</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 211.

<sup>72</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 211.

responsibility for anti-racist work *within* white communities.<sup>73</sup> This agitated politically active Jews who a) didn't necessarily consider themselves white, b) viewed racial separatism in light of Nazism, and c) felt betrayed after having helped fund and fight alongside many such organizations.<sup>74</sup> These fundamental ideological differences helped solidify the intercommunity rift that was already brewing, with Israel and Zionism repeatedly appearing as a sticking point.

Even in moments of acrimony between Black people and Jews that, on the surface, appeared entirely unrelated to Israel, anti-Zionism emerged as a rhetorical device in domestic squabbles. This was evident in the eruption of Black-Jewish tension during the Ocean-Hill Brownsville debacle of 1968. Like many of its time, this largely Black Brooklyn neighborhood was plagued with unfavorable, racist conditions for Black students, lacking sufficient infrastructure, money, supplies, and books relative to predominantly white schools.<sup>75</sup> Black parents subsequently fought for “community control,” a Black Power initiative that promoted decentralized Black-led education free from white influence.<sup>76</sup> After interviewing white faculty and quizzing them on the responsiveness to the problems facing poor Black children, the community-controlled school board, itself led by a Black activist, Rhody McCoy, fired a group of white teachers.<sup>77</sup> They asserted that white people were inherently unqualified to teach Black children, as their white lenses rendered them ill equipped to nurture Black children and Black identity under white supremacy. At the time, many of those white teachers were Jewish.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Buhle and Kelley, “Allies of a Different Sort,” 214.

<sup>74</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Kaufman, “Blacks and Jews: Struggles in the Cities,” in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997), 112.

<sup>76</sup> Kaufman, “Struggles in the Cities,” 112.

<sup>77</sup> Kaufman, “Struggles in the Cities,” 113.

<sup>78</sup> Kaufman, “Struggles in the Cities,” 113.



This might have been a missed opportunity for an enraged Jewish community to reflect on the fact that Jewish day schools would be reluctant to hire non-Jews to rear Jewish children, but instead they turned to protest. (Of course, Jewish day schools are private institutions, and are therefore exempt from the same nondiscrimination laws as public schools. But a historically insular and marginalized community like the Jews might have been inclined to empathize with the Black community in their desire to put Black teachers in front of Black children.) The United Federation of Teachers, headed by Albert Shanker, a liberal Jew who had once marched with Martin Luther King, led the teachers in a strike that shut down hundreds of schools for many months. When the teachers tried to return to school, they were blocked by masses of Black protesters.<sup>79</sup> Mutual vitriol engulfed the district, and suddenly an issue that was “white and Black” was now *also* “Black and Jewish.” The teachers union claimed that antisemitic leaflets had been placed in the teacher’s mailboxes. The antisemitic rhetoric allegedly found in these leaflets directly referred to Israel, referring to Israelis as “Middle East Murderers of Colored People.”<sup>80</sup> Rather than criticizing white Jewish racism in Black-majority schools, Israel was inserted into the conversation, and American Jews were held responsible for Israeli violence where it had been irrelevant. This convoluted incident combined legitimate critiques of white Jewish racism with anti-Zionist-turned-antisemitic rhetoric, which would eventually become convenient fodder for the growing Jewish hysteria around Black antisemitism.

Incidents like Ocean Hill-Brownsville presented an ideological ultimatum, not only for liberal Jews who had supported the civil rights movement, but even more so for left-wing Jews entangled in the more radical New Left. Over time, it became clear that Zionism or Zionist apologetics became a Jew’s one-way ticket out of the movement. This is captured in former

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<sup>79</sup> Kaufman, “Struggles in the Cities,” 112.

<sup>80</sup> Kaufman, “Struggles in the Cities,” 114.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)<sup>81</sup> Chairman, Stokely Carmichael's 1968 speech to the Organization of Arab Students' Convention in Michigan, wherein he stated that "if white people who call themselves revolutionary or radical want our support, they have to condemn Zionism."<sup>82</sup> Some Jewish leftists felt this posture was ideologically inconsistent, because if Black people asserted the primacy of group identity, so too, should Jews in their pursuit of group pride and right to safety. According to their point of view, if a militant Black nationalism was considered acceptable among the left, why not a conceivably parallel Jewish nationalism and Jewish liberation achieved through armed struggle? This ideological confusion is captured by political author, Paul Berman, in his description of what a Jewish liberal or leftist inner monologue might have sounded like at the time,

*"Surely the African Americans will understand that Israel is the minority civil rights movement of the Middle East, and terrorists and tyrants who oppose it are the majority enemies of justice. Surely the African Americans will understand how, just as poor whites in the American South are eager to attack the southern Blacks, so are the poor Arabs in the Middle East are eager to pounce on the Jews... Surely we, the persecuted minorities can appreciate each other's predicament. Surely the hearts of African Americans will beat for Israel!"<sup>83</sup>*

Jews of this mindset could not understand what was so unquestionably permissible about the Black freedom struggle that was apparently untranslatable to the Jewish experience, particularly after the Holocaust. This argument, however seemingly sound on paper, is deceiving, or at the very least incomplete. It disregards the reality that the establishment of the State of Israel was made possible by the displacement of over seven hundred thousand Palestinian

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<sup>81</sup> Established in 1960, SNCC was the leading student presence in the civil rights movement, particularly on Black voter registration in the South. In the late 1960's, SNCC joined the Black Power movement.

<sup>82</sup> Lewis Young, "American Blacks and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1972): 78.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Berman, "Introduction: The Other and the Almost the Same," in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1994), 21.

Arabs.<sup>84</sup> It also draws a false equivalence between generations of institutionalized white supremacist violence that created the conditions for Black suffering, and the legacy of antisemitism, the worst of which has taken place away from the shores of America. The intra-and inter-community bewilderment about white Jews and their whiteness, and the role of Zionism in shaping Jewish identity would continue to perplex all those invested in the fight for a more just world.

This intricate web of tension and confusion between American Jews and Black militants was further illuminated in a 1968 visit from the Israeli embassy in Washington DC to LA by Israeli diplomat, Ephraim Evron. In an effort to understand Black radical support for Palestinians over the Israelis, he met with a number of Black militants in the Watts section of Los Angeles. Whatever Evron was prepared to hear about Israel's territorial occupation as the root of Black anger, he instead heard an earful about the Jewish community of Los Angeles. They shared deep frustration that the money Jews raised to plant trees in Israel "came from profits skimmed from the city's Black consumers."<sup>85</sup> Another person denounced the apparent hypocrisy of liberal Jews lobbying for military aid to Israel, while maintaining opposition to armed Black resistance. One individual was particularly angry that the Jewish community had invited then governor and perceived enemy to Black people, Ronald Reagan, to speak at a "Rally for Israel's Survival" in the midst of the Six Day War. When a confused Evron asked why he, or Israel, should be blamed for the actions of American Jews in Los Angeles, one man replied, "you're one people, aren't you?"<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Simha Flapan, "The Palestinian Exodus of 1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer, 1987).

<sup>85</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 2.

This incident again brought to the forefront the intricacies of the American Jewish relationships to Zionism, Israel, diaspora, and peoplehood - highlighting the complex and fluid categorization of Jews in the non-Jewish imagination. Are Jews a religion? A people? Both? Something else? What are the implications for defining antisemitism when employing one category over another? As mentioned previously, Jews have historically disagreed with one another about who and what they are, sometimes shifting categories in response to the threat of antisemitic violence. For example, prior to the Revolutionary War, American Jews referred to themselves as a nation. In order to avoid antisemitic accusations of dual loyalty following the revolution, they discontinued this identity category in exchange for denominational definitions of Jewishness.<sup>87</sup> While there is often *legitimate confusion* among non-Jews about what Jews are exactly (after all, the Jews can't agree,) certain categories of Jewishness are often chosen for rhetorical expediency. In the case of Evron, Jews were understood by these Black leaders as a unified people with shared interests, and by extension, shared culpability. In other moments, people categorize Jews strictly as voluntary members of a religion, often in response to accusations of antisemitism. Within this logic, only incidents of *religious* discrimination toward Jews count as antisemitic, and anything said about Jews outside of strictly *religious* grounds is considered "fair game."

Clearly, the categorization of Jews is anything but static, and its elasticity makes room for antisemitic rhetoric, whether exploited purposefully by antisemites or inadvertently by the ignorant. However, one could argue that a deep analysis of the intricacies of Jewish identity in order to carefully avoid antisemitic rhetoric should not have been a high priority for Black people facing life threatening conditions on a daily basis. If Jews cannot find total consensus

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<sup>87</sup> Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 17.

about the nature of Jewishness, it might be considered unfair to demand that Black people keep up with the intra-community conversation as a precondition for Jewish support.

Beyond asking “who and what are Jews,” the Ronald Reagan incident also crystallized the ideological dilemma facing white Jews through the present. With whom are they willing to ally to serve niche Jewish interests? Do Israel’s interests supersede domestic issues in the eyes of American Jewry? American Jewish pursuit of Israel allies at any cost, namely, collaboration with right-wing forces antagonistic to oppressed peoples, has always and continues to undermine coalitions working to uproot American white supremacy.

According to Black radicals, particularly those like SNCC and the Black Panthers entrenched in Third World global solidarity movements, Israel was founded through ethnic cleansing in order to become a Western puppet in the region and protect Western oil interests.<sup>88</sup> American Jews were, according to this logic, complacent at best and complicit at worst in their own instrumentalization for Western political and economic gain. To struggle against Israel was to struggle against the United States. This approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fits neatly within the radical Black understanding of racism as political, social, and economic subordination systematized through colonialism and colonial logic. Whatever sentiments of post-Holocaust sympathy Israelis may have incurred among more radical Black people in the early years of statehood had withered by the 1956 Suez Crisis when Egypt attempted to nationalize the canal.<sup>89</sup> It disappeared altogether by the Six Day War, a battle Black radicals understood as white imperialists defeating a colonized brethren of color. While Black militants understood Palestinians as the “Black” players in this war, their solidarity was more rooted in a universal analysis of hierarchy and colonialism, rather than an oversimplified transposing the American

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<sup>88</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 68.

<sup>89</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 47.

Black experience onto the Palestinians.<sup>90</sup> Israel's subsequent financial ties to apartheid South Africa sealed the bitterness in perpetuity.<sup>91</sup>

From this political moment forward, a Black organization's relationship to Israel and Zionism was not an ideological matter of peripheral concern, but rather part and parcel of its political identity. According to Harold Cruse, "it has become almost axiomatic that one can determine just which political, economic, cultural, or civil rights 'bag' any Negro intellectual is in, by whether or not he is willing to criticize American Jews and Israel publicly."<sup>92</sup> In many ways, the liberal vs. left/radical struggle for power over the Black freedom movement was fought at the intersection of the Black-Jewish-Israel relationship. These political questions sowed discord not only between Black people and white Jews, but between Black people themselves. The differences in attitudes toward Israel among Black reformers and revolutionaries helped shape American Black identity, its relationship to the United States, and its role in the Third World. "On the one hand," writes law professor Annalisa Jabaily, "Black nationalists felt an international 'pull' to analogize their own subordination to that of Palestinians and oppressed peoples around the world. On the other hand, Black nationalists felt a domestic 'push' out of the liberal accommodationist camp. The pro-Arab position was the result of both forces."<sup>93</sup> With global anticolonialism shaping the Black Power consciousness, political questions around Israel became a "veritable fault line separating the two approaches to securing a just future for Black Americans."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 26.

<sup>91</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 36.

<sup>92</sup> Jabaily, "Estrangement," 215.

<sup>93</sup> Jabaily, "Estrangement," 212.

<sup>94</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 5.

## **An Infamous Newsletter - A Turning Point**

What could be considered the seminal act of irrevocable damage between radical Black people and white Jews was the release of the June-July 1967 SNCC newsletter. Inside was a searing condemnation of Israel's territorial gains in the Six Day War acquired through what they believed to be Zionist imperialist aggression.<sup>95</sup> Originally intended to be an internal consciousness-raising tool for SNCC activists, the article entitled "Third World Round Up, The Palestine Problem: Test Your Knowledge" catapulted the Black Power movement onto the American scene of foreign policy and blurred American Black racial identity with Middle Eastern politics. In an effort to present a kind of "people's history of Israel/Palestine" with condensed talking points, the rhetoric of the newsletter turned from anti-Zionist critique into antisemitic hostility. Amidst historical inaccuracies referencing United States financial and military aid to Israel were biting polemics about the Zionist militias that helped achieve Israeli statehood through terrorist violence. This departed from anti-Zionism and transitioned into antisemitism with classic antisemitic tropes, like references to the Jewish Rothchild family's "control" of Europe and Africa's mineral wealth.<sup>96</sup> Also pictured was a cartoon hand with a Star of David and the United States dollar sign holding a noose around the necks of late Egyptian president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, and former Black heavy weight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali. Another cartoon featured Israeli general, Moshe Dayan's military uniform with dollar signs on each of his shoulders. Additionally, the article was accompanied by a photo depicting Israelis holding Palestinian Arabs at gunpoint with a caption that read, "Zionists lined up Arab victims and shot them in the back in cold blood. This is the Gaza Strip, not Dachau, Germany."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ethel Minor, "Third World Round Up, The Palestine Problem: Test Your Knowledge," *SNCC Newsletter Vol. 1 No. 4, June-July 1967*, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/6707\\_sncc\\_news-r.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/6707_sncc_news-r.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> Minor, "Third World Round Up," 5.

<sup>97</sup> Minor, "Third World Round Up," 4.

Whatever claims made by Black radicals of their categorical rejection of antisemitism and an embrace of principled anti-Zionism were undermined by this antisemitic imagery. *For even the most vehemently anti-Zionist of Jews*, accusations of worldwide Jewish control of wealth and rhetorical connections between Nazis and Israelis are considered uncontestably antisemitic.

In the first half of the 1960's, Jews had featured prominently among SNCC members, but after the organization's adoption of the Black Power stance of exclusive Black control over Black destiny, many disillusioned Jews withdrew their labor and financial support. Furthermore, Jews considered the aforementioned newsletter an irrevocable act of betrayal, and it produced a flurry of backlash from both liberal Jewish organizations and Black moderates. SNCC leaders held a press conference to respond to the outcry, during which they doubled down on its political stance, reiterating that "Israel is and always has been the tool and foothold for American and British exploitation in the Middle East and Africa."<sup>98</sup> Chairman Stokely Carmichael further commented that "the same Zionists that exploit the Arabs also exploit us in this country."<sup>99</sup> This is a fact. And that is not antisemitic."<sup>100</sup> Decades later, SNCC activist Courtland Cox remembered, "Palestine was another example of what was happening to us... it was the same people involved in our oppression who were involved in their oppression over there."<sup>101</sup> Beyond the comparisons of suffering, Black revolutionaries were angered by Israel's 1967 territorial gains of the Sinai Peninsula. As Carmichael asserted, "Egypt is in Africa, and Africa is our motherland, and an aggression against the motherland is an aggression against us."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Young, "American Blacks," 78.

<sup>99</sup> This is an example of replacing "Jew" with "Zionist." It likely refers to the often exploitative relationship between Black tenants and customers of Jewish landlords and small business owners in urban areas that sparked mass uprisings and intercommunity violence in the 1960's.

<sup>100</sup> Young, "American Blacks," 79.

<sup>101</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 36.

<sup>102</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 48.



A month after the dissemination of the newsletter, SNCC released a public statement titled “The Middle East Crisis.” In it, they asserted that they “recognized Hitler’s massacre of the Jews as one of the worst crimes against humanity” but “by the same token, [they] could not see how Jewish refugees and survivors would ever use this tragedy as an excuse to imitate their Nazi oppressors.”<sup>103</sup> They cited the British and American governments as silencers of dissenting Arab and “Afro-Asian” governments who questioned the legality of Israel’s statehood. They again referenced the Rothschild family using their “control” of European and African resources to facilitate Israel’s founding. They concluded with a scathing critique of the United States for having collaborated with the “powerful organized Zionist movement to take over another people’s home and replace this people with a partner who has well served America’s purpose... to exploit and control the nations of Africa and the Middle East!”<sup>104</sup>

While there was universal clarity among SNCC members that Israel was the perceived aggressor against Palestinians, there *were* organizational controversies around public-facing statements and the proper guidelines for responding to public inquiries. At every juncture, SNCC made an effort to clarify that they were opposed to Israel, not to Jews, and that “if Jews equated Jewishness with Zionism, and thus felt attacked, that was their error.”<sup>105</sup> Their internal documents critiqued Jewish liberals for what they perceived to be intellectual dishonesty regarding Israel, lamenting that “their liberality has suddenly become strangely like fascism.”<sup>106</sup> SNCC activists struggled to understand Jewish reticence to criticize Israel. If Black radicals appeared to carry no baggage when exposing reactionary African governments or so called “Uncle Toms” in America, they wondered, why did Jews collectively recoil at principled anger

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<sup>103</sup> Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), *The Middle East Crisis*, August, 1967.

<sup>104</sup> (SNCC), *The Middle East Crisis*, August, 1967.

<sup>105</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 40.

<sup>106</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 40.

directed at Israel? This critique, while seemingly sound, does not translate well to the Jewish psyche of tribal-survival-at-any-cost, particularly in a post-Holocaust world. According to American Jewish group norms, airing collective dirty laundry of one's own numerically miniscule and historically vulnerable people, regardless of one's personal orientation to the issue, is a violation of the group contract that protects the collective Jewish future.<sup>107</sup> Unity around Israel, perceived or real, has been an enduring project for American Jewry. This sort of "people over politics" mentality did not sit well with Black radicals. They argued that "true progressives were those who were consistent in their advocacy for justice and their condemnation of oppression... and were equally vehement in their denunciation of what they considered pseudo-progressives who hypocritically were willing to criticize everyone except their own people."<sup>108</sup> Noticing that their pro-Palestinian position was alienating them from Jews and the liberal Black-Jewish coalition, SNCC wrote in a newsletter,

*"Perhaps we have taken the liberal Jewish community or certain segments of it as far as it can go. If so, this is tragic, not for us but for the liberal Jewish community. For the world is in a revolutionary ferment... our message to conscious people everywhere is 'don't get caught on the wrong side of the revolution'."*<sup>109</sup>

The Jewish organizational response to SNCC's newsletter was swift with outrage. As previously described, the prevailing Jewish attitude in 1967 was that this war was a miraculous triumph for Israel and the Jewish people worldwide. This military victory sent a message to enemies of the Jews across the globe that the feeble, defenseless Jew was a figure of the past. Additionally, American Jews and their more accommodationist Black allies agreed that Israel was a progressive democracy in an undemocratic region, deserving United States support on that

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<sup>107</sup> See President of the Shalom Hartman Institute, Yehuda Kurtzer's reference to this phenomenon in "Conflict Among Jews."

<sup>108</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 43.

<sup>109</sup> Jabaily, "Estrangement," 216.

premise alone. In the American Jewish psyche of the day, any notion of a counter-narrative that not only defended, but celebrated the Arab countries was unthinkable, if not considered an immediate threat to Jewish life everywhere. Several months after the newsletter was released, the ADL published a report that exposed SNCC's images and captions as having been cited verbatim from a 1966 pamphlet produced by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).<sup>110</sup> Their other materials were taken from the Palestine Arab Delegation, the organ of Hajj Amin al-Huseini, the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem known as "Hitler's man in the Middle East."<sup>111</sup> Of course, this wasn't much of a scandal, as SNCC was not secretive about its support for the PLO.

In a public statement, the ADL's Irving Shulman accused SNCC of antisemitism and treason for having conformed to "pro-Arab, Soviet, and racist lines."<sup>112</sup> Arnold Forster of the ADL commented that same day, lamenting the "tragedy that the civil rights movement is being degraded by the injection of hatred and racism in reverse."<sup>113</sup> Accusations of "reverse racism" were echoed by American Jewish Committee Executive Director, Will Maslow, who called the newsletter "shocking and vicious antisemitism," claiming there's "no room for racists in the fight against racism."<sup>114</sup> The Jewish Labor Committee charged SNCC as having "irrevocably joined the antisemitic American Nazi party and the Ku Klux Klan as an apostle of racism in the United States."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Founded in 1964, the PLO was the leading force behind the armed struggle for Palestinian liberation. It was considered a terrorist organization by the United States and Israel until 1991.

<sup>111</sup> Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, "How Racists, Black and white, Used Arab Propaganda Sources," *Facts: Domestic Report Volume 17, No. 5* (October 1967), page 421, Folder 009056-020-0197 Papers of the NAACP, Part 28: Special Subject Files, 1966-1970, Series A, Brandeis University Archives.

<sup>112</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 31.

<sup>113</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 31.

<sup>114</sup> Jabaily, "Estrangement," 219.

<sup>115</sup> Kathleen Teltsch, "SNCC Criticized for Israel Stand: Rights Leaders Score Attack on Jews as 'Anti-Semitism'," *New York Times*, August 16, 1967, <https://www.nytimes.com/1967/08/16/archives/sncc-criticized-for-israel-stand-rights-leaders-score-attack-on.html>.

The more progressive American Jewish Congress, too, spoke out against SNCC. Its Commission on International Affairs published a thorough memorandum of rebuke. “Israel, Africa, Colonialism, and Racism: A Reply to Certain Slanders” addressed the charges made against Israel for complicity in colonial violence. President Arthur Lelyveld opened with personal disappointment at his old SNCC comrades, under whose influence he was able to “manifest and make real in [his] own life, those principles which [he] believes can alone ameliorate the human condition.”<sup>116</sup> He lamented that they had become, in his opinion, an anti-white, anti-Jewish organization who made use of “tactics from the gutter.”<sup>117</sup> After providing a detailed timeline establishing what he believed to be the legality of Israel’s founding, the memo honed in on Israel’s relationship with newly independent African nations who liberated themselves from colonial oppression. He then cited a statement to Israeli Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, from Kenyan President, Jomi Kenyatta, “whose credentials as an anti-colonialist [were] surely equal to those of H. Rap Brown, Ralph Featherstone, or other officers of SNCC.”<sup>118</sup> Kenyatta’s memo to Eshkol read, “our relations have been based on friendship, understanding, and mutual respect. I should like to express our appreciation of the assistance which your government and people have extended to this country.”<sup>119</sup> The statement went on to cite a joint communique between Israel and Kenya that read, “Prime Minister Eshkol and President Kenyatta agreed that Kenya and Israel should continue to cooperate in furthering the cause of peace, and the abolition of colonialism, and discrimination.”<sup>120</sup> The memo also referenced a

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<sup>116</sup> Arthur Lelyveld, “Israel, Africa, Colonialism, and Racism: A Reply to Certain Slanders,” *American Jewish Congress, Commission on International Affairs* (September 1967), page 3, Folder 252253-057-0629 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Brandeis University Archives.

<sup>117</sup> Lelyveld, “Slanders,” 4.

<sup>118</sup> Lelyveld, “Slanders,” 4.

<sup>119</sup> Lelyveld, “Slanders,” 8.

<sup>120</sup> Lelyveld, “Slanders,” 8.

statement by Congolese Prime Minister, Leonard Mulamba, who wrote, “I can affirm that the countries of Africa have something in common with the State of Israel. They were all victims of racial prejudice and fought obstinately before retrieving their place in the concert of free nations.”<sup>121</sup>

Central to the Jewish critique of SNCC and other radical Black organizations was the notion that racism is a two-way street, that anyone can be racist. That white Jews embraced what would later be coined “reverse racism” in their analysis of SNCC and the like, is *itself* evidence of their own de-racialization as “other” and re-racialization as “white” (even if one could stretch to argue that their whiteness is conditional.) White Jewish charges of “anti-white racism” reflect the collective adoption of the dominant thinking of the white power structure and ignore racism’s most critical ingredient. Without *systemic power* to bolster speech and actions, one is left with empty prejudice. Prejudice from below does not carry the same material weight as racism that afflicts its victims from above. Jews’ misguided acceptance of the premises undergirding “reverse racism” collapses all ill-will between Black people and Jews as equal, reciprocal harm between two horizontally situated entities. This, of course, disregards the reality that the Black-Jewish alliance has always been a “partnership of unequals. Proverbially in the same boat, Jews and Blacks travelled on different decks with the latter confined to the steerage.”<sup>122</sup> This discrepancy in political analysis would continue to disrupt the conversation and potential for coalition-building through the present.

### **Gathering the Left - The Conference for New Left Politics**

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<sup>121</sup> Lelyveld, “Slanders,” 9.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Weisbord and Richard Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishing, 1985), 139.

Around two weeks after the SNCC newsletter debacle, Black-Jewish volatility reemerged in Chicago at the National Conference for New Left Politics. Co-chaired by SNCC activist, Julian Bond, and Georgia House of Representatives, Simon Casady, this political gathering convened activists from all over the country and across the liberal-left political spectrum with the long-term goal of creating a new world order.<sup>123</sup> They aspired to end the Cold War, eliminate white supremacy, encourage world nuclear disarmament, and establish solidarity with Third World revolutionaries.<sup>124</sup> The conference was an attempt to forge an expansive political alliance between anti-war organizations, New Leftists, militant civil rights groups, student activists, and social welfare, labor, and religious organizations to combat the “conventional American politics of party labels and personalities.”<sup>125</sup> During the conference, friction emerged as some three hundred and fifty Black radicals demonstrated their racial separatism with a dramatic exit to initiate their own conference. The remaining four hundred created a Black Caucus, producing a thirteen-point policy plan that they insisted the conference adopt in exchange for their continued participation. Among demands for fifty-percent representation on all convention committees, Black control of Black political groups, and support for all wars of national liberation around the world, the statement included an explicit denouncement of Israel, condemning “the imperialist Zionist war” (Six Day War).<sup>126</sup> This ignited a contentious debate, as their ultimatum publically tested the white delegates and their willingness to unequivocally endorse the plan in order to maintain Black attendance. Some white liberals and leftists, Jewish and not, felt the urge to adopt the resolution as a gesture toward Black-white unity, one that they’d hoped would salvage the

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<sup>123</sup> Simon Hall, “On the Tail of the Black Panther: Black Power and the 1967 Convention of the National Conference for New Left Politics,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (April 2003): 61.

<sup>124</sup> Hall, “On the Tail of the Black Panther,” 61.

<sup>125</sup> Hall, “On the Tail of the Black Panther,” 61.

<sup>126</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 28.

future of the movement. This was hard to reconcile, as many understood the Six Day War to have been won by a “beleaguered little country that had acted in self defense to prevent another Holocaust” and that its occupation of Arab lands were “fruits of the war it was forced to fight.”<sup>127</sup> For the New Left Zionists like Michael Lerner, Israel did not occupy new territory out of an “inner drive for expansion or to satisfy religious or Zionists aspirations, but rather in response to a real military threat.”<sup>128</sup> For another proud New Left Zionist, Steve Plaut, the events that transpired at the conference stimulated a turning inward toward his community. In an article to *The Jewish Exponent* titled “My Evolution as a Radical Zionist” he wrote, “today I am no longer an American New Leftist. Today, my place is in my own community. I still retain my progressive politics, but the New Left and I are on opposite sides of the barricade. For me, the red flag means nothing without the Jewish star next to it.”<sup>129</sup>

One of the conference officials eventually proposed a change in rhetoric that called for Israeli withdrawal to pre-67 borders and recognized Israel’s right to exist, but he was denied the floor to speak. Keynote speaker, Martin Luther King Jr., later claimed that when one of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)<sup>130</sup> compatriots, James Bevel, also spoke out about the rhetoric, a group of Black militants pulled their weapons on him with threats to shoot.<sup>131</sup> Ultimately the language was modified to condemn the Israeli government, and no one was harmed, but fractures continued to deepen as attempts by white people to pacify, adapt, or compromise Black demands were understood to be an affront to Black freedom.

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<sup>127</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 28.

<sup>128</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 219.

<sup>129</sup> Steve Plaut, “My Evolution as a Radical Zionist,” *The Jewish Exponent*, January, 15, 1971, <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/892793629?accountid=9703>.

<sup>130</sup> Established in 1957, the SCLC was one of the leading civil rights organizations of the 20th century. Martin Luther King Jr. was its first president.

<sup>131</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 28.

## **The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) - An Inconsistent Tone**

No Black organization's orientation toward Israel was quite as enigmatic as the Congress for Racial Inequality (CORE). Established in 1942, CORE was a giant in the nonviolent Black freedom struggle under its leader and longtime Israel supporter, James Farmer. In 1965, Farmer embarked on a five-day visit to meet with Israel's labor federation, top government officials, and to learn about Jewish farming communities as a model for rural American Black people.<sup>132</sup> Though CORE was once considered intimately tied to liberal Jews (famously slain Jewish civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were CORE activists), the organization eventually joined the ranks of the Black Power movement, embracing the call for armed resistance and a nationalist-separatist politic. Their official statements on Israel, however, were often vague, ambiguous, and dependent upon the personal politics of the national director. For example, in August 1967, then Director, Floyd McKissick, was asked to address the SNCC newsletter controversy at a press conference at the YMCA in Harlem. He evaded the question by saying he hadn't studied the newsletter, and when pressed to articulate CORE's stance on antisemitism, he stated there was "no room in CORE for persons with antisemitic sentiments."<sup>133</sup> It's possible, however, that McKissick's public statements were more strategic than anything else. SNCC's James Forman once recounted a June meeting with the ambassador of Guinea and Floyd McKissick, wherein CORE leaders explained to African nations their reasons for not taking an official position on the Arab-Israeli war. Deeply embedded in the integrationist-Black nationalist splintering, McKissick alluded to the fact that an explicitly anti-Zionist position might

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<sup>132</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 58.

<sup>133</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 58.



destroy the organization.<sup>134</sup> This choice of ambiguity was strategically necessary, as McKissick's attendance at the National Conference for New Politics garnered significant attention from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American rabbis who demanded that he articulate his personal stance on the anti-Zionist resolution adopted there. In response, McKissick diplomatically stated that because CORE supports nationalism, CORE could not endorse anti-Zionism.<sup>135</sup>

CORE shifted back rightward with McKissick's successor, Roy Innis. Interestingly, Innis was none too reluctant to expose the apparent contradictions of Black people's inability to criticize Israel without being labeled antisemitic, while white Jews could criticize Black people without reciprocal accusations of anti-Blackness.<sup>136</sup> On the other hand, he unapologetically criticized the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine's (PFLP)<sup>137</sup> in an editorial titled "The Jews Must Not Stand Alone," wherein he claimed the hijacking of American jets and deliberate separation of Jewish hostages from other passengers undermined the Palestinian position that they were anti-Zionist and not antisemitic.<sup>138</sup> While eventually understood to be in the Black Power camp, CORE would continue to fluctuate between passive support and slightly antagonistic positions on Israel, unable to arrive at a consistent conclusion for years to come.<sup>139</sup>

### **The Black Panthers & The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)**

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<sup>134</sup> Jabaily, "Estrangement," 225.

<sup>135</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 58.

<sup>136</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 59.

<sup>137</sup> Founded in 1967, the PFLP was a secular Palestinian Marxist-Leninist and revolutionary socialist organization for Palestinian liberation.

<sup>138</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 59.

<sup>139</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 60.

No entity came to better represent fiercely militant anti-Zionism than the Black Panthers, so much so that they lent their enthusiastic and public support for Fatah - the largest Palestinian guerilla organization within the PLO. For the Panthers, Fatah brought to life a model of collective self-liberation, one that refuses to appeal to the mercy of one's oppressors. Exiled Black Panther Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, had established a satellite office in Algeria, home to a major Fatah office and center of Black-Palestinian coalition-building. In July 1969, Cleaver publicly proclaimed that Israel was an American "puppet and pawn," and that Fatah would be victorious. Each group was heavily influenced by Algeria's war of independence and Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, wherein he discusses the potent relationship between "Negroes and Arabs."<sup>140</sup> This notion, coupled with Fatah's proficiency in English, signaled a swift and natural fusion of interests and intergroup solidarity. While originally focused on domestic Black issues exclusively, the Black Panthers soon developed party lines around foreign policy, and eventually drew explicit comparisons between police brutality and state violence against Black people in the United States with the violence wielded by Israelis against Palestinians. As Cleaver once expressed in 1968,

*"Those who are primarily concerned with improving the Negro's condition recognize, as do proponents of the liquidation of America's neo-colonial network, that their fight is one and the same... it is at this point, at the juncture of foreign policy, that the Negro revolution becomes one with the world revolution."*<sup>141</sup>

Following the Six Day War, there was a dramatic uptick in the Black Panther press criticizing Israel. Of the forty-three issues of *The Black Panther* published between June 1969 and March 1970, thirty-three articles stated support for Palestinians.<sup>142</sup> Fatah extended reciprocal solidarity with the worldwide Black struggle on numerous occasions. At the Pan-

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<sup>140</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 112.

<sup>141</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 112.

<sup>142</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 114.

African Cultural Festival in August 1969, the movement publicly linked Palestinian experience with Africans, claiming that while Palestinians and their freedom struggle were not part of “Africa the continent” they were part of “Africa the cause.”<sup>143</sup> Black Power supporter and Japanese activist, Yuri Kochiyama, recalled that in the late 1960’s a number of Palestinian guerillas visiting the United States told her of Palesinians back in the Middle East using code names like Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Black Panther.<sup>144</sup> Commenting on the withdrawal of leftist Jewish support for the Black freedom movement, Black Panther International Coordinator, Connie Matthews, wrote in 1970,

*“The white Left in the U.S.A. is comprised of a large percentage of the Jewish population. Before the Black Panther Party took its stand on the Palestinian people’s struggle, there were problems, but the support of the white Left for the Black Panther Party was concrete. However, since our stand, the white Left started floundering and became undecided. This leads us to believe that a large portion of these people are Zionists and therefore racists.”*<sup>145</sup>

A key point of connection between the Palestinian guerillas and the Black Panther Party was their mutual admiration for each other’s production of visual culture - namely cartoons, posters, and other forms of political resistance art.<sup>146</sup> In one evocative Black Panther Party cartoon appearing in 1970, a large-breasted female pig representing the United States sits atop an American flag nursing two piglets: West Germany and the State of Israel. Another illustration depicted two drooling pigs standing nose to nose, one labeled US Imperialism, another wearing an eye-patch carrying an Israeli flag, representing Israeli General, Moshe Dayan.<sup>147</sup> The pig imagery transposed Black Panther ideology about the police-as-pigs onto Israel, who they believed to wield control with commensurate violence.

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<sup>143</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 115.

<sup>144</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 139.

<sup>145</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 118.

<sup>146</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 121.

<sup>147</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 121.

The Black Panthers eventually underwent an ideological split whose fault line is most evident along Israel/Palestine. Shortly after his release from prison in 1970, Black Panthers co-founder, Huey Newton, spoke to this shift in party line at a press conference on antisemitism. While he firmly and publicly embraced the Palestinian struggle, he also referenced “coexistence” and “harmony,” and purposefully disentangled the Israeli government from the ordinary Jewish citizens of Israel.<sup>148</sup> Retaining the viewpoint that Israel was “created by Western imperialism and maintained by Western fire power,” he did suggest that Jews could “make the case for separatism and a Zionist state based upon their religion for self-defense.”<sup>149</sup> In the same breath, however, he claimed that while this was a *theoretically* acceptable position, the establishment of the state was still, according to the Panthers, politically immoral. Complexities and semantics aside, the rigidity of the opposition to the “Zionist fascist” State of Israel was beginning to fade for what would become Newton’s ideological wing of the Panthers. A stark change in political tone can be seen in a Black Panther position paper shortly after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 that uplifted the rights of *both* Israelis and Palestinians to live peacefully, emphasizing justice and human rights for all people. The new Black Panther official policy paper titled “The Issue Is Not Territory, But Human Rights” stated, “we can no longer accept an unprincipled posture, in the interest of misguided subjective notions. We can no longer allow our posture to be characterized as simple ‘pro-Arab,’ for we support the right of all human beings to freedom and human dignity.”<sup>150</sup> It *even* went on to uphold the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

Ultimately, the fracturing of the party can be attributed more to the FBI’s COINTELPRO’s calculated misinformation campaign to sow organizational chaos, rather than

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<sup>148</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 122.

<sup>149</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 123.

<sup>150</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 126.

to the changing views about Israel.<sup>151</sup> However, there remains a clear negative correlation between the party's decline in revolutionary rhetoric toward domestic racism and its warmer policy toward Israel.<sup>152</sup> Overall, solidarity with Palestinians was more than a peripheral component of Black Panther ideology, but rather an integral piece of their political identity. Their positions served to normalize pro-Palestinian sentiments in the American mainstream for decades to come.

## Chapter 2

### The Black Mainstream & The Jews (1967-1979)

Mainstream Black organizations, such as the NAACP<sup>153</sup> or the National Urban League<sup>154</sup> faced different ideological challenges than did radicals on the Israel/Palestine question. Motivated by a mutual desire to neutralize Black militants, and sharing with liberal Jews in their core values of liberalism, coalition-building, reform, and investment in the state to enact institutional change, mainstream Black organizations were quick to line up behind Israel during and after the Six Day War. The Black mainstream perceived Israel as a bastion of multi-ethnic democracy fighting against Soviet-backed antisemites who threatened American Cold War interests. The most reputable voices of the Black mainstream establishment press echoed this sentiment. The *Michigan Chronicle* wrote in July 1967 that American Black people supported Israel because it was the “side that best advanced democratic ideals of freedom, justice, and

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<sup>151</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 123.

<sup>152</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 123.

<sup>153</sup> Established in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was the leading civil rights organization for African Americans in the 20th century.

<sup>154</sup> Established in 1910, the National Urban League, formerly known as the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, is a civil rights organization based in New York City that advocates on behalf of economic and social justice for African Americans and against racial discrimination in the United States.

human dignity.”<sup>155</sup> The same newspaper compared the “anti-Negro forces in the South” to the “anti-Semitic adversaries of the Jews in Israel.”<sup>156</sup> The *Cleveland Call and Post* referred to the Six Day War as a “holy war” initiated by Israel’s Arab neighbors, one that put “the Jewish homeland in peril of extinction.”<sup>157</sup> Condemning the 1975 UN resolution that deemed Zionism racist, the *Chronicle* wrote that Jewish nationalism was a “hunger for a peaceful life and neighborly relations with the indigenous Palestinians in a common homeland.” In a similar vein, the *Philadelphia Tribune* branded the UN resolution “Hitler-like.”<sup>158</sup>

While the Black establishment organizations and intellectuals were quicker to uplift Palestinian dignity and acknowledged violence toward Palestinians more than American Jews, they harshly condemned Palestinian armed resistance and reaffirmed at every juncture Israel’s desire to defend itself. It must be stated that some of these organizations felt beholden to Jewish philanthropists to help sustain their work.<sup>159</sup> While Black moderate responses were not *solely* informed by Jewish input, their work relied heavily on Jewish financial support,<sup>160</sup> and fear of Jewish backlash tempered criticism against Israel and contributed to Black disunity.<sup>161</sup>

### **Martin Luther King Jr. & The Zionist Mythology**

Contrary to popular belief, Martin Luther King was not an unambiguous supporter of Israel. To be sure, his Christian faith and meaningful relationships with Jews led him to the Holy Land and solidified his commitment to Israel’s existence and security. However, his home visits

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<sup>155</sup> Gary Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in the Black Establishment Press,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 1980): 73.

<sup>156</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 73.

<sup>157</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 73.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 75.

<sup>159</sup> Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 213.

<sup>160</sup> Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 213.

<sup>161</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 56.

with suffering Palestinian Arabs in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1959 had a lasting impact on his religious and political philosophy.<sup>162</sup> King's various experiences inspired an ambitious plan to conduct a pilgrimage to Christian holy sites with the SCLC in 1966. However, the intensifying violence between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank drew widespread international attention that threatened to undermine the moral clarity of his visit in light of his anti-war pacifism. In November 1966, several thousand Israeli troops raided the Palestinian village of Sammu' in response to the killing of three Israeli border patrolmen who detonated a mine allegedly planted by Fatah guerillas.<sup>163</sup> The international condemnation of the Israelis, coupled with the Six Day War that soon followed, posed an even bigger challenge to King's planned voyage to holy sites that were now under Israel's military control. Such a sojourn would now appear to publicly compromise King's principles of nonviolence, especially in light of Israel's preemptive strike against Egypt that facilitated Israel's military triumph, and subsequent occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank where King planned to visit.<sup>164</sup> Commenting on the ultimate cancellation of his trip, King wrote that "for Israel peace requires firm and unequivocal insurance of their territorial integrity...For the Arab world, peace requires the elimination of poverty, illiteracy, and disease which has prevented these Third World nations from developing stable, viable lives."<sup>165</sup>

Immediately before the war, King signed onto an advertisement in the *New York Times* calling on the United States to intervene and stand behind Israel.<sup>166</sup> This public statement of support is often cited by American Jews as a demonstration of King's fervent Zionism. However,

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<sup>162</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 74.

<sup>163</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 79.

<sup>164</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 78.

<sup>165</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 82.

<sup>166</sup> Martin Kramer, *The War on Error: Israel, Islam, and the Middle East* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2016), 254.

according to FBI wiretapped phone calls between King and his advisors, King claimed in private that he never saw the text as published, and would *not* have signed it if he had.<sup>167</sup> On June 6, 1967, the day after the war began, King said the following,

*“Did you see the ad in the New York Times Sunday [June 4]? This was the ad they got me to sign with [John C.] Bennett, etc. I really hadn’t seen the statement. I felt after seeing it, it was a little unbalanced and it is pro-Israel. It put us in the position almost of setting the turning-hawks on the Middle East while being doves in Vietnam, and I wouldn’t have given a statement like that at all.”*<sup>168</sup>

In general, King was able to finesse public comments that circumvented scrutinizing Israel’s actions. He privately expressed moral concerns about Palestinian suffering, while publically reiterating Israel’s right to exist, and thus maintaining hold of Jewish support. He consistently spoke about Palestinian grievances, but often in terms of class oppression and inaccessibility of civil equality, rather than public commentary on Palestinian dispossession, refugees, and property loss.<sup>169</sup> When pressed for comment about the territorial gains from the Six Day War, King had no choice but to answer with careful specificity: “I think for the ultimate peace and security of the situation, it will probably be necessary for Israel to give up this conquered territory because to hold on to it will only exacerbate the tensions and deepen the bitterness of the Arabs.”<sup>170</sup> He also declined to comment on the SNCC newsletter controversy, claiming he hadn’t read it, but reiterated his opposition to antisemitism and anything that did not reflect his concern for the Jewish people.<sup>171</sup>

Unable to avoid the unfolding hostility in the aftermath of the SNCC newsletter and the Black caucus’s policy statement at the National Conference for New Left Politics, King was

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<sup>167</sup> Kramer, *The War on Error: Israel*, 255.

<sup>168</sup> Kramer, *The War on Error: Israel*, 255.

<sup>169</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 82.

<sup>170</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 83.

<sup>171</sup> Teltsch, “SNCC Criticized for Israel Stand.”



called upon by Jewish establishment giants like the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the United Synagogues of America, and the ADL to publicly denounce the gathering in light of its statements about Israel.<sup>172</sup> As the keynote speaker at the conference, King was now implicated in its policies. In his letter to the American Jewish Committee's Morris Abram, King wrote, "Israel's right to exist as a state in security is incontestable."<sup>173</sup> In an official statement from the SCLC, King affirmed his position that "neither military measures nor a stubborn effort to reverse history can provide a permanent solution for peoples who need and deserve both development and security."<sup>174</sup> The statement concluded with a firm disavowal of antisemitism, a critical swipe at Black militants who were "color consumed" and "[saw] a kind of mystique in being colored" that engendered hostility to those who were not.<sup>175</sup> Ultimately, King's vision for Black identity in America and his politics of nonviolence found him straddling solidarity with American Jewish liberals and the Black Power movement's Third World internationalist orientation. While he spoke positively about Israel as an oasis of progressive values and democracy, he consistently held the plight of the Palestinian Arabs in his heart.<sup>176</sup>

### **The NAACP - Friends and Foes**

Perhaps more than any other Black organization in American history, the NAACP has worked most closely with American Jews, as Jews were once well represented among its top

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<sup>172</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 85.

<sup>173</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 85.

<sup>174</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 86.

<sup>175</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 87.

<sup>176</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 88.

leadership. Its leaders have long advocated for Israel, stretching back to Executive Director Walter White's tireless lobbying of Haiti and Liberia to support the original UN vote on Jewish statehood.<sup>177</sup> That said, White warned Jewish leaders of the "'very dangerous attitude' of those pressuring him" during the vote, citing "obvious condescension bordering on contempt for Haitians and Liberians because they are Black and poor. The language used seemed clearly to indicate that Haitians, Liberians, and Indians should obey orders without question."<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, the NAACP supported Israel, saluting the brand new Jewish state at their own annual convention in Kansas City in 1948.<sup>179</sup> The Six Day War, however, presented a political challenge for then Executive Director, Roy Wilkins. The NAACP had no history of *official* policy statements on foreign affairs. They'd shied away from commenting on the Vietnam War, and were that much more reluctant to venture into risky publicity on an issue as contentious as Israel. Immediately after the war broke out, the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations set out to plan a pro-Israel rally in Washington and sought from Roy Wilkins a public issue of support. In consultation with his board, Wilkins doubled down on their procedure of only responding publicly to issues of domestic civil rights, despite his having written a draft statement of unconditional support for Israel that was never released (quoted below).<sup>180</sup> It is worth noting, however, that at least one of his board members, C. R. Darden, highlighted the political conundrum of "refusing a request from our great benefactors (the Jews)."<sup>181</sup> Both as an expression of authentic support and a concession to a white Jewish need for reassurance "in the

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<sup>177</sup> Greenberg, "Negotiating Coalition," 163.

<sup>178</sup> Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 158.

<sup>179</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 54.

<sup>180</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 55

<sup>181</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 52.

face of militant Black assaults on mainstream sensitivities,”<sup>182</sup> Wilkins began drafting personal statements of support for Israel and disdain for the surrounding Arabs:

*“A people persecuted down through the centuries has been returned to its motherland and through sacrifice, industry, knowledge, and ingenuity has made a land bloom and has built a bastion of democracy...Never again must it be possible for fourteen nations, united only in a common and fanatic hatred of a people and its religion, to surround, militarily, another nation and announce brazenly to a stunned world that their concerted mission is one of extermination.”*<sup>183</sup>

Addressing the SNCC newsletter debacle, Wilkins condemned their antisemitic and pro-Soviet rhetoric in *The New York Times*, writing of the “sad development” of young Black people “seeking to overcome injustices suffered by their race, [employing] against Jews the same hateful distortions and lies that have been used for three hundred and fifty years against their own kind.”<sup>184</sup> Eventually, the NAACP board instructed Wilkins to discontinue signing statements that did not originate from the NAACP, but his public support did not end there. Trumpeting his pro-Israel *bona fides*, Wilkins likened Black antisemitism to Nazism in front of the National Jewish Labor Committee in November 1967.<sup>185</sup> Following the 1975 UN resolution that deemed Zionism inherently racist, Wilkins published in the *Afro-American* a searing critique of Arab states for branding Israel as discriminatory “just because some Jews have the political belief in a homeland.”<sup>186</sup> That same year, *The Jewish Exponent* featured an article titled “NAACP Urges Black African Nations to Befriend Israel” within which Clarence Mitchell, the Director of the NAACP’s Washington bureau, spoke to the American Hebrew Congregations claiming that African nations “must learn that they can derive greater benefits from the democratic principles of Israel than by merely identifying with Arab states because of a color

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<sup>182</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 52.

<sup>183</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 55.

<sup>184</sup> Jabaily, “Estrangement,” 228.

<sup>185</sup> Young, “American Blacks,” 72.

<sup>186</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 74.

affinity.”<sup>187</sup> As was the case with a number of mainstream Black organizations, the NAACP continued to support Israel and American Jews unconditionally until 1979, when the highest ranking Black official and UN Ambassador, Andrew Young, broke with US custom not to meet with representatives of the PLO. His subsequent ouster from the Carter administration created nearly irreversible damage between white Jews and, for the first time, the Black *mainstream* (See section entitled “The Andrew Young Affair - Tension Turns Mainstream.”)

### **A Look at The National Urban League**

Longtime coalition-builders and friends to the Jews, The National Urban League also stood staunchly on the side of Israel after the Six Day War. Then Director, Whitney Young, was quoted as saying that Black people had been victimized by racism too long to express racial hatred toward Jews.<sup>188</sup> He, too, compared SNCC’s newsletter to Nazi-like propaganda. Upon return from a visit to Israel, he concluded that Israel did not have the “hysterical color-consciousness” found in America, and that “Israel’s brilliant and charming Prime Minister, Golda Meir” was making concrete efforts to maximize the economic mobility of Palestinian citizens of Israel.<sup>189</sup> In an article published in *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency* in 1970, Young referred to the Israeli military presence in the occupied West Bank as “the most lenient armed occupation in history. Despite the repeated acts of armed terrorism, West Bank Arabs enjoy self-government under the leaders...publish anti-Israeli newspapers and freely propagandize against

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<sup>187</sup> “NAACP Urges Black African Nations to Befriend Israel,” *The Jewish Exponent*, June 20, 1975, <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/901390894?accountid=9703>.

<sup>188</sup> Young, “American Blacks,” 74.

<sup>189</sup> Young, “American Blacks,” 74.

the Israelis, an extraordinary situation.”<sup>190</sup> Young consistently attempted to debunk what he called the “myth of the Arab-Black friendship” propagated by the Black Power movement.<sup>191</sup> Throughout the 1970’s, the National Urban League continued to support Zionism, as its Executive Director, Vernon E. Jordan Jr., understood it to mean the “national liberation movement of the Jewish people, a movement that overthrew British colonialism and articulated the national aspirations of the Jewish people.”<sup>192</sup> Condemning the 1975 UN resolution on Zionism, Jordan accused Black African states’ affirmative votes as capitulation to the pressures of “Arab oil money.”<sup>193</sup> Like the NAACP, The National Urban League would continue to back Israel until the ouster of Andrew Young.<sup>194</sup>

### **The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) - King and Beyond**

Like many of their moderate counterparts, the SCLC made few public commitments concerning Israel. American Jews nevertheless turned to them for statements of pro-Israel support, particularly in response to the Six Day War. Months after the fighting, the SCLC office was flooded with letters directed to Dr. King, imploring him to become an Israeli-Palestinian peacemaker, and to support Israel’s strategic presence in the lands it seized in wartime. These Jews, often individuals with no ties to any specific organization, like George Liberman, asked that he give his “courageous support for Israel in her critical struggle for survival.”<sup>195</sup> Crying out

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<sup>190</sup> “Whitney Young Rejects Myth of Arab-Black Amity; Calls for U.S. Aid to Israel,” *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 2, 1970, <https://www.jta.org/1970/11/02/archive/whitney-young-rejects-myth-of-arab-Black-amity-calls-for-u-s-aid-to-israel>.

<sup>191</sup> “Whitney Young Rejects Myth of Arab-Black Amity,” *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency*.

<sup>192</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 74.

<sup>193</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 74.

<sup>194</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 74.

<sup>195</sup> George Liberman, Letter to Martin Luther King Jr., June 18, 1967, Folder 001563-017-0519 Series I, Correspondence, 1958-1968, Subseries 3, Secondary Correspondence, 1958, 1960-1967, Brandeis University Archives.

against what he believed to be Egyptian aggression in the Six Day War, Liberman appealed to Dr. King's Christian leadership, writing,

*“Will the Christians and other religions of the world let it take place?! Will the progressive world let it take place?! Will men of good will, reason and justice, including the Arabs, close their eyes and let the Arab chauvinist leaders mislead their people to crime and killing and get away with it?!...the ones who are neutral - are they indifferent to the Arab aim to destroy Israel?! The ones who support the Arabs - are they aware that they are, in fact, helping the Arabs to exterminate Israel?”<sup>196</sup>*

Juxtaposing Dr. King's liberal civil rights rhetoric with his perception of Israel, he concluded that “conscience, brotherhood, peace, equality, and justice rests with Israel!” Eileen Barry, an ordinary Jewish individual of Atlanta wrote to the SCLC in 1967 that *as a Jew*, she and others had given moral, financial, and political support for the civil rights movement, “risking their lives and reputations in [his] marches.”<sup>197</sup> Now that Israel was in “grave danger,” she wrote, “I have waited impatiently for a statement of encouragement, outrage, support from any of the major leaders of the civil rights movement. I have waited in vain. You have said that we are not alone - that all good men joined together can win any just cause. It's a two way street, Reverend King.”<sup>198</sup>

It is not clear whether or not the SCLC responded to any of these appeals, but when other moderate civil rights leaders were publicly attacking SNCC's statement on Israel, King declined to comment. During the Conference of New Politics in Chicago, *The New York Times* disclosed that King responded to a telegram from ten different Jewish organizations urging him to distance himself from the people and politics that emerged from the conference.

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<sup>196</sup> Liberman, Letter to Martin Luther King Jr.

<sup>197</sup> Eileen Berry, Letter to Martin Luther King Jr., June 8, 1967, Folder 001563-017-0519 Series I, Correspondence, 1958-1968, Subseries 3, Secondary Correspondence, 1958, 1960-1967, Brandeis University Archives.

<sup>198</sup> Berry, Letter to Martin Luther King Jr.

A little over a decade later, with the Black Power movement having waned in its political zeal, the SCLC hoped to pick up the mantle in peacemaking between Israel and the PLO with then President, Joseph Lowery, spearheading the bridge-building efforts. After a meeting in New York with a PLO representative in 1979, Lowery issued a statement supporting Palestinian human rights and the right to Palestinian self-determination in their homeland. The following day, they met with Israeli UN Ambassador, Yehudah Blum, to discuss the conflict and share concerns about Israel's relationship with apartheid South Africa. Blum was none too pleased, referring to the PLO as terrorists bent on the destruction of the Jewish state.<sup>199</sup> Four weeks later, Lowery traveled to Lebanon to meet with PLO head, Yasser Arafat, as part of what they called the "SCLC Middle East Peace Initiative."<sup>200</sup> While in Beirut, the group visited Palestinian schools, hospitals, and refugee camps. According to press accounts, Lowery wore a *keffiyeh* head covering made famous by Palestinian guerillas, and posed for pictures holding a toy gun.<sup>201</sup> The delegation was anxious to meet with Israeli officials during their visit, but Israeli General, Moshe Dayan, advised Prime Minister, Menachem Begin to refuse, so they returned home. Ultimately the initiative made no political headway, but the group summarized their efforts claiming,

*"We were successful in illustrating by our mission that we take seriously the material costs to us as Black Americans in any area of the world where the U.S. has a vital stake and that we will not be silenced or excluded from participation in those decisions which affect our lives and the well being of this country."*<sup>202</sup>

Former SCLC leader, future presidential candidate, and rival to Joseph Lowery, Reverend Jesse Jackson, too, made a trip to Lebanon to meet with Arafat several months after. He also traveled to the occupied West Bank to meet with Palestinians in a refugee camp. There, he

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<sup>199</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 195.

<sup>200</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 196.

<sup>201</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 196.

<sup>202</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 198.

reported a sort of embodied familiarity with the Palestinian experience. Referring to his sense of morbid belonging, Jackson said, “when I smell the stench of open sewers, this is nothing new to me. This is where I grew up.”<sup>203</sup> Upon his return, both Jewish and Black leaders condemned his visit as a political sideshow and accused him of having been more concerned with the plight of the Palestinians than the issues of the Black ghetto. Likening his initiative to Martin Luther King, Jackson said that his meeting with Arafat was no more an endorsement of terrorism than King’s conferring with Lyndon Johnson was an endorsement of the war in Vietnam.<sup>204</sup> In a *Washington Post* article, SCLC Chairman, Walter Fauntroy, reflected on the negative Jewish response saying, “I am somewhat surprised. The American people will find it hard, as I do, to understand why anyone can be opposed to our appealing to the PLO to stop killing Israeli men, women, and children, and to our urging to the PLO to recognize Israel’s right to exist.”<sup>205</sup> These various visits by mainstream Black leaders showed once again that the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians continued to be a site of political identity-formation and tension among American Black leaders well beyond the Black Power era.<sup>206</sup>

### **Bayard Rustin - Friend and Comrade**

The American Jewish community saw no greater comrade in their fight for Israel’s protection and public image than Bayard Rustin. This socialist, pacifist, and civil rights activist had been one of the most prominent leaders of the movement as an early founder of CORE and

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<sup>203</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 203.

<sup>204</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 203.

<sup>205</sup> “PLO to Continue Attacks, Arafat Tells SCLC Group,” *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1979, A23.<http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/147067093?accountid=9703>.

<sup>206</sup> Clayborne Carson, “Black-Jewish Universalism in the Era of Identity Politics,” in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997), 190.



the SCLC. Known as “Israel’s man in Harlem,” Rustin advocated passionately and publicly on behalf of Israel for decades, deepening the public rifts between Black moderates and radicals as he shifted his orientation “from protest to politics.”<sup>207</sup> In an effort to demonstrate loudly that the Black Power movement did not speak for most Black Americans, Rustin recruited sixty-four prominent Black leaders on behalf of the A. Philip Randolph Institute to cosign an advertisement in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* calling for the United States to support Israel.<sup>208</sup> This advertisement included a call on the Nixon administration to fulfill Israel’s request for American military aircrafts in its ongoing fighting with the Soviet-backed Egyptians along the Suez Canal, a clause that was added *after* many of the signatories had approved.<sup>209</sup> The statement went on to position its cosigners in opposition to the Black Power party line on Israel, writing,

*“Some Americans, including a small minority of Blacks have expressed the feeling that the Middle East crisis is fundamentally a racial conflict between nonwhite Arabs and white Israelis. We think that this point of view is not only uninformed but dangerously misleading. It ignores the fact that approximately half the Jewish Israeli population consists of immigrants from Asia and Africa. It also implies that there is an inherent solidarity of nonwhite people... We should add in this regard that Israel, with its impressive program of foreign technical aid, has contributed far more than any of its Arab enemies to the development of Black African nations... We, therefore, support Israel’s right to exist for the same reasons that we have struggled for freedom and equality in America.”*<sup>210</sup>

This sentiment encapsulates the natural weaving of *liberal* (as opposed to left) Black-Jewish interests. American Jewish groups were elated to have cultivated explicit support among civil rights giants, but some of Rustin’s pacifist comrades quickly questioned what they believed to be a betrayal of the principle of nonviolence in his pursuit of arms for Israel. Rustin remained

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<sup>207</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 60.

<sup>208</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 60.

<sup>209</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 64.

<sup>210</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 66.

steadfast, calling on the United States to play a role in fostering peace, but only in a manner “consistent with the democratic values upon which we have based our own struggle in America.”<sup>211</sup> A. Philip Randolph himself reiterated the importance of the advertisement in light of the relationship between Black people and Jews in America, suggesting,

*“In the past few years there have been some tensions between these two communities which have negatively affected the attitudes of a minority of Blacks toward Israel... It is in the interest of both groups [Blacks and Jews] that the ties that bind them be nourished, not severed.”*<sup>212</sup>

Rustin even wrote to Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, shortly after the statement’s release in hopes that “the ad [would] also have an effect on a serious domestic question: namely, the relations between the Jewish and Negro communities of America.”<sup>213</sup> He hoped the public display of support would “heal the divisions between the two groups so that their important alliance for social justice [could] be maintained.”<sup>214</sup>

Black responses to Rustin’s ad varied. One congressional representative from the midwest admitted that he had signed it exclusively for political strategy, noting that fifteen percent of his constituency was Jewish.<sup>215</sup> Thirteen Black newspapers published the full ad, some critical, others praiseworthy. Some deemed the signatories as instruments of their own oppression and the oppression of other peoples of color worldwide. Wielding accusations of “Uncle Tomism,” one individual rebutted Rustin, writing, “America has presumed to set up a white watchdog in this Black stronghold to ensure that oil will be regulated to American industries. Israel’s geopolitical position separates Asia and Africa and insures imperialist

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<sup>211</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 65.

<sup>212</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 65.

<sup>213</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 67.

<sup>214</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 67.

<sup>215</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 67.

supervision of natural resources on both continents.”<sup>216</sup> Six months later, Rustin found a direct counterstatement in *The New York Times* from the “Committee of Black Americans for Truth about the Middle East.”<sup>217</sup> Unequivocal in their opposition to Zionism and the State of Israel as “the outpost of American imperialism in the Middle East,” the statement consolidated Israel, South Africa, and then Rhodesia, as “three privileged white settler states that came into existence by displacing indigenous peoples from their lands.”<sup>218</sup>

The mid-to-late 1970’s led Rustin further away from his leftist origins and toward neoconservatism, accompanied by an even more intensive push for public support for Israel. Following the UN resolution on Zionism in 1975, he wrote in the *Sacramento Observer* that Zionism is not racism, rather “the legitimate expression of the Jewish people’s self-determination.”<sup>219</sup> He maintained a somewhat compassionate stance toward Palestinian suffering, but echoed Jewish-posed arguments condemning Arab regimes for refusing to take responsibility for dispossessed Palestinians by resettling them in their own lands. However, this orientation disregarded Palestinian’s rejection of resettlement as a form of justice and ignored their demand for the right of return to their homeland. In response to the Ford administration pressuring Israel to make diplomatic concessions to Egypt in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, Rustin formed the Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC).<sup>220</sup> Rustin worked in partnership with Jewish leaders like Irwin Suall of the ADL, longtime civil rights activist Rabbi Balfour Brickner, the Jewish Labor Committee’s Emanuel Muravchik,<sup>221</sup> the

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<sup>216</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 68.

<sup>217</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 107.

<sup>218</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 107.

<sup>219</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 74.

<sup>220</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 173.

<sup>221</sup> Interestingly, Brickner and Muravchik were members of the American Jewish left. Brickner was active in Breira, an organization established after the 1973 Yom Kippur War to express a Jewish left-wing position on Israel. Muravchik was a socialist who did not identify as a Zionist. It’s possible that Rustin

NAACP's Roy Wilkins, and A. Philip Randolph to constitute a "Statement of Principles" that pitched the case for pro-Israel support. Their statement was publicly endorsed by fifty prominent Black leaders.<sup>222</sup> BASIC worked very closely with Jewish allies from across the Jewish political spectrum, including dovish leaders like Brickner and neoconservative Jewish thinkers like Norman Podhoretz.<sup>223</sup> He sent BASIC leaders to Jewish conferences, held joint Black-Jewish receptions for visiting Israeli diplomats, and even extended solidarity on behalf of Soviet Jews in their human rights campaign for emigration.

BASIC's mission sought to foster understanding of Israel as a democracy, sponsor Israel trips for Black leaders, educate Black audiences in support of Israel, facilitate better relations between Israel and Black African nations, and counter anti-Zionist propaganda.<sup>224</sup> For example, the American Jewish Congress sponsored a workshop for BASIC members on "Israel and the Arab World" in 1975.<sup>225</sup> Among those invited was Black Congresswoman and BASIC member, Cardiss Collins. Referencing her trip to Israel through her work with BASIC, her public address denied accusations of "Israeli intransigence" regarding their refusal to withdraw from the Occupied Territories. This later appeared in Kansas City Black newspaper, *Call*, with the headline "Black Congresswoman Says, 'Stand Behind Jewish Nation.'"<sup>226</sup>

Rustin articulated four basic arguments to help persuade American Black people to support the State of Israel and recognize the strategic benefits of allying themselves with American Jews. According to Rustin, (1) Arabs initiated the slave trade; (2) Arabs supported

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was significantly more hawkish on Zionism than these particular Jewish leaders with whom he partnered to write his Statement of Principles.

<sup>222</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 175.

<sup>223</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 181.

<sup>224</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 175.

<sup>225</sup> Smith, "Perspectives on Zionism," 83.

<sup>226</sup> Smith, "Perspectives on Zionism," 83.

anti-Black movements in Somalia and Ethiopia; (3) Arabs damaged the economy of Black African developing nations by their 1973 oil boycott in response to the Yom Kippur War, and (4) Arabs practice racial and religious bigotry against companies employing Jews and conducting business with Israel.<sup>227</sup> While Rustin often paid lip service to Palestinian rights to self-determination, he was quick to qualify those sentiments by asserting that they should never come “at the expense of the rights of Jews to independence and statehood, and not at the command of the economic blackmailers or of terrorists who would force their own solution at the point of a gun.”<sup>228</sup> In a letter to the editor of the *New York Amsterdam News*, Rustin made his position even more clear, writing that “so long as the Palestinians and Arabs remain dedicated to the destruction of Israel, the right of Israel to exist must take precedence over the right of the Palestinians to self-determination.”<sup>229</sup>

The committee was forced to contend with cognitive dissonance when, in 1974, Israel sent an ambassador to Pretoria, South Africa. Two years later, Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, hosted South African Prime Minister, John Vorster, putting Israel’s endorsement of, or at the very least, complacency in apartheid in the international public eye. During this same period, Israel ended all support for anti-South African resolutions in the United Nations and began selling the apartheid regime sophisticated weapons systems and military equipment.<sup>230</sup> The publicity from this encounter tested the Black press’s ability to act independently of pro-Zionist positions that had been developed and advanced by BASIC and its Jewish partners. The outcry by the Black press prompted Rustin to seek more clarification about Israel’s position on

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<sup>227</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 78.

<sup>228</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 79.

<sup>229</sup> Smith, “Perspectives on Zionism,” 79.

<sup>230</sup> Salim Yaqub, “‘Our Declaration Of Independence’: African Americans, Arab Americans, and The Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1979,” *Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies Vol. 3 No. 1*, (July 2015): 18.

apartheid in a letter to prominent Jewish scholar and activist, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg of the American Jewish Congress. In an attempt to justify Israel's economic relations with South Africa, Hertzberg noted that nineteen African states and other European states also engaged in trade relations during the apartheid regime. In light of this, Hertzberg felt Israel should not be uniquely scrutinized. Rustin eventually adopted the assessment that trade relations with apartheid South Africa was economically critical for Israel's survival, but this opinion was weak and unpopular among those who exposed the trade as having been arms related. Even the typically pro-Israel *Philadelphia Tribune* wrote, "it is ironic that Israel who has screamed about the UN resolution equating Zionism to racism will see fit to contribute militarily to a regime which has become the world's principal oppressor of Blacks."<sup>231</sup>

Not all mainstream Black people endorsed BASIC, especially in the press. Robert Brown, a staff member of the *New York Amsterdam News*, for which Rustin often wrote, called members of the organization "false oracles."<sup>232</sup> He suggested that BASIC was organized by the Israel lobby to advance a positive image of Israel to a Black audience and to undermine the relationship between American Black people and peoples of the Third World. Columnist Harry Amana of the *Philadelphia Tribune* felt that BASIC was comprised of "well intentioned, misinformed individuals along with some opportunistic ones who claim to reject Arab propaganda while swallowing without criticism Zionist propoganda."<sup>233</sup> An editorial in the *Atlanta Voice* in 1976 wrote that Black people "should not be intimidated by Jewish money or Jewish ties to the extent that we cannot articulate the issues germane to Black survival at home and abroad."<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Smith, "Perspectives on Zionism," 87.

<sup>232</sup> Smith, "Perspectives on Zionism," 79.

<sup>233</sup> Smith, "Perspectives on Zionism," 80.

<sup>234</sup> Smith, "Perspectives on Zionism," 80.

Rustin's ideological orientation that undergirded his support for Israel was challenged when in 1977, Israel's Labor Party lost the elections for the first time in Israeli history, severing the socialist legacy to which he felt intimately connected. Nevertheless, he forged on. In 1979, he appealed to the Black community in *The New York Times* calling for their disavowal of the PLO. Critical of Ambassador Andrew Young's secret meeting with PLO representatives, he wrote that Black support for the PLO constituted a crisis that risked the "forfeiture of [their] own moral prestige...and [they] risk becoming the unwitting accomplices of an organized group committed to the bloody destruction of Israel, indeed of the Jewish people."<sup>235</sup> Commenting on feeble Black efforts to direct PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, away from violent tactics, he wrote in *The Washington Post*,

*"Yasser Arafat and other PLO leaders are not people who have taken to the gun with great remorse. They are not peaceful, gentle souls who might someday consider assaulting Israeli society with picket lines, choruses of "We Shall Overcome" or voter registration drives. The PLO is a terrorist movement whose tactics are little different from those of America's Ku Klux Klan. If Arafat, as the result of moral argument, should miraculously experience a conversion and disavow terrorism, it is doubtful that the Soviet Union would allow PLO control to remain for long in the hands of a born-again pacifist."*<sup>236</sup>

Despite a growing sense of moral confusion in the Black community about uncritically supporting Israel, Rustin never relinquished the fight, and continued to publicly support Israel until his death in 1987.

### **The Andrew Young Affair - Tension Turns Mainstream**

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<sup>235</sup> Bayard Rustin, "To Blacks: Condemn PLO Terrorism," *New York Times*, August 30, 1979. <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/08/30/archives/to-Blacks-condemn-plo-terrorism.html>.

<sup>236</sup> Bayard Rustin, "Rejecting the Black-PLO Connection," *The Plain Dealer*, October 12, 1979, Folder: 001581-015-0184, Black-Jewish Relations. PLO [1979.], Chronological Subject File--Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC). 1975-1985, Brandeis University Archives.

As evidenced above, by 1979, the remnants of the Black-Jewish alliance of the 1950's-1960's had fractured. Grievances had long smoldered against organized American Jewry for having been among the vanguard against affirmative action, which continued to illuminate a more permanent divergence of interests between white Jews and Black people. Black people often asserted that "affirmative action [was] as important to them and their survival as Israel [was] to most Jews."<sup>237</sup> In the words of the SCLC's Joseph Lowery, "the creation of Israel itself was an example of affirmative action."<sup>238</sup> After a decade-long collision course of mutual bitterness, charges against Jews for undermining Black self-determination intersected with the Israel debate in an explosive incident, one that sealed a tragic dissolution of this once bicomunal partnership.

Andrew Young was once a notable civil rights figure in the SCLC, an executive board member of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, and eventually the most powerful Black official in the Carter administration in his post as Ambassador to the UN. In 1979, he was Washington's biggest pariah after conducting a secret meeting with the PLO's observer to the UN, in defiance of a 1975 pledge that Henry Kissinger had made to the Israelis that the US wouldn't talk to the PLO until it recognized Israel's right to exist. Young believed himself to have acted on behalf of American interests, agreeing to meet with PLO representative, Zehdi Terzi, only after being informed that Kuwait might apply economic leverage against the United States "unless something were done to solve the Palestinian problem."<sup>239</sup> Prior to this incident, Young had unquestionable credentials as an ally of Jews and endorser of Zionism. In fact, he was one of the

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<sup>237</sup> Weisbord and Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective*, 133.

<sup>238</sup> Weisbord and Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective*, 133.

<sup>239</sup> Carl Gershman, "The Andrew Young Affair," *Commentary*, Vol. 68 Is. 5, (November 1, 1979): 25. <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290178818?accountid=9703>.



earliest members of Bayard Rustin's BASIC. He supported military assistance to Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and lambasted the 1975 UN resolution denouncing Zionism as racism.<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, Young insisted in his public resignation that he had "no regrets, for the fact that perhaps we broke the comfortable diplomatic channels and we violated some long-ago made agreements that are ridiculous."<sup>241</sup> Young had informed the State Department about his meeting, but had described it as purely social.<sup>242</sup>

After the *Time* magazine's bureau in Jerusalem caught wind of the meeting through Israeli intelligence and solicited a response from the US State Department, chaos erupted between white Jews and Black leaders.<sup>243</sup> Already displeased with Carter's policy toward the Middle East, Jewish organizations were incensed at Young's defiance. Betram Gold of the American Jewish Committee suggested that if Young had indeed acted on his own accord, then he should be fired, leaving room for the possibility that he had acted under Carter's orders.<sup>244</sup> ADL National Chairman, Maxwell Greenberg, was "aghast" at Young's audacity to call "spokesmen for murderers (the PLO) 'decent human beings'".<sup>245</sup>

Despite Jewish frustration, Joseph Sternstein from the American Zionist Federation was the only Jewish leader from the organized Jewish community who explicitly called for Young's removal.<sup>246</sup> President Jimmy Carter agonized over the decision to accept his resignation, as Young was a close friend and ally, but Carter had alienated many American Jews whose support

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<sup>240</sup> Weisbord and Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective*, 129.

<sup>241</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 183.

<sup>242</sup> Yaqub, "Our Declaration Of Independence," 20.

<sup>243</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 186.

<sup>244</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 186.

<sup>245</sup> "ADL Scolds Andrew Young for Embracing the PLO," *The American Israelite*, February 1, 1979, <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/1009686346?accountid=9703>.

<sup>246</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 186.

he needed in his 1980 reelection campaign. On the eve of his departure, Young held a conference call with Black mayors of Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, Newark, New Orleans, and Washington DC in which he asked city leaders to help “see there was no schism” between Black people and Jews on account of his resignation.<sup>247</sup>

This incident contrasts starkly with Black anger toward Israel and American Jewry in 1967, which originated almost exclusively in the radical sphere. In 1979, frustration emanated from Christian ministers, congressional representatives, and mainstream Black leaders who had long upheld Israel’s legitimacy, but now believed American foreign policy had been unfairly partial to Israel. Furthermore, it appeared Jews thought it obligatory for Black people to back the Israeli position. Even more serious was the perceived “Jewish implication that Blacks lacked the intelligence to understand the tangled Middle East dispute.”<sup>248</sup> Critiques once charged in muted tones were now amplified with crystal clarity. In the case of Andrew Young’s ouster, Black leaders of all political stripes were livid about what appeared to be a direct affront to Black people and their hard-fought seat at the table of American foreign policy. To all who looked on from afar, the highest ranking Black official had been humiliated and exiled just to assuage the Israelis. Black leaders were further incensed when it came to light that American ambassador to Austria, Milton Wolf (Jewish), had held *three* meetings with a member of the PLO several months earlier, and was not sanctioned by the Carter administration.<sup>249</sup> James Farmer of CORE attempted to put the intra-community dispute into perspective when he addressed the National Association for Human Rights Workers, stating,

*“In light of the complexity of the issues in the Middle East and the historic appetite for violence on both sides, dare we stand mute when differences over there threaten to dismember a*

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<sup>247</sup> Weisbord and Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective*, 124.

<sup>248</sup> Weisbord and Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective*, 125.

<sup>249</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 188.

*mutually advantageous and altogether precious alliance over here...To allow others to split our forces would invite defeat. To split our own forces ourselves is suicide.*"<sup>250</sup>

Farmer's propensity for reconciliation was not popular among an outraged Black mainstream.

Rather, "exasperation with perceived Israeli intransigence, and with the American Jews who abetted it, became the dominant mood."<sup>251</sup>

The SCLC's Joseph Lowery spoke for many when he addressed the still widely-held belief that Black people remained at the mercy of Jewish donors, claiming, "if we have to maintain your friendship by refraining from speaking to Arabs, then that friendship must be reassessed."<sup>252</sup> Adding further commentary, Reverend Jesse Jackson explained that "when there wasn't much decency in society, many Jews were willing to share decency. The conflict began when we started our quest for power. Jews were willing to share decency, but not power."<sup>253</sup> At this time, some two hundred and thirty of the most prominent mainstream Black leaders from the NAACP, SCLC, and the National Urban League jumped to protest the callousness of Andrew Young's departure. Met with a standing ovation at the NAACP headquarters, their public statement was considered a "declaration of independence" from the Jews, according to renowned Black psychologist and educator, Kenneth Clark.<sup>254</sup> In a *New York Times* article entitled "NAACP Urges Review of Ban on Talks with PLO," some NAACP board members said that while their organization had longstanding ties with American Jews, "they would not accept any criticism from Jews if the association later decided to meet with the PLO."<sup>255</sup> Unlike the Black

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<sup>250</sup> James Farmer, Excerpts from an address to the National Association of Human Rights Workers, October 15, 1979, Folder: 001581-015-0184, Black-Jewish Relations. PLO [1979.], Chronological Subject File--Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC). 1975-1985, Brandeis University Archives.

<sup>251</sup> Yaqub, "Our Declaration Of Independence," 21.

<sup>252</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 189.

<sup>253</sup> Weisbord and Kazarian, Jr., *Israel in the Black American Perspective*, 125.

<sup>254</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 189.

<sup>255</sup> Thomas Johnson, "N.A.A.C.P. Urges Review of Ban on Talks with P.L.O.," *New York Times*, A13, September 11, 1979. <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/>

Power orientation, these mainstream Black leaders felt unequivocally American and resented that foreign policymaking seemed to be a white-only game, or so Young's ouster signified to them. In justifying Young's choice to meet with the PLO, they asserted that further unrest in the region would have direct ramifications on Black life in America. The Arab oil embargo from the 1973 Yom Kippur War had an enormous impact on the global economy, and figures like Joseph Lowery claimed, "if things get tight, it would be like America catching a cold and Black people developing pneumonia."<sup>256</sup> Reverend Jesse Jackson echoed the same sentiment regarding American Black interests and a stable Middle East because "in a hot war we will die first, and in a cold war over oil, we will be unemployed and freeze first."<sup>257</sup>

Many once ardent supporters of Israel, some signatories to Bayard Rustin's *New York Times* statement, and even Rustin himself, were now embittered because their most powerful political figure had dared to interpret America's interests, while many Jews "felt perfectly free to interpret, discuss, lobby, and try to shape American foreign policy without sanction."<sup>258</sup> It wasn't until six weeks into the political disaster that President Jimmy Carter settled the debate and announced that American Jewish leaders had *not* explicitly urged him to ask for Young's resignation.<sup>259</sup> But by then, Black people and white Jews were locked into an adversarial dynamic.

As is often the case in these moments of convoluted tension, legitimate critiques of Zionism and Israel morphed into antisemitic tropes. In the immediate aftermath of the Young affair, the SCLC rushed to blame "Jewish banks" for exploitation in South Africa. *The Village*

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docview/120703205?accountid=9703.

<sup>256</sup> Yaqub, "Our Declaration Of Independence," 21.

<sup>257</sup> Yaqub, "Our Declaration Of Independence," 21.

<sup>258</sup> Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 190.

<sup>259</sup> Gershman, "The Andrew Young Affair."

*Voice* printed an essay accusing a Jewish-run “image-shaping industry” of preventing Black publications or the TV portrayal of Black life.<sup>260</sup> Former top official of the NAACP, Gloster Current, accused American Jews of dual loyalty.<sup>261</sup> Not only were Israelis placing constraints on American diplomacy by preventing direct engagement with the PLO, but American Jewry was seen as standing directly in the way of Black self-determination. A martyred Andrew Young was now perceived to be the ultimate Black victim of unregulated Jewish power.

In its formal protest to the US government over Young’s actions, Israel played its own role in fomenting this controversy. In light of the subsequent chaos, this might have been a missed opportunity for the American Jewish community to reckon with the consequences of their uncritical support of Israel, and question the automatic censoring as antisemites all who spoke up about Palestinian suffering. For the first time in the history of this partnership, American Jewry could not dismiss Black anger as fringe or radical. Those longtime friends and allies, ones who so loudly condemned antisemitic rhetoric within their own movements, were now wielding the charges against Israel and American Jews. Unfortunately, this Jewish communal self-reflection never came to pass, and the estrangement continued to deepen for decades to come.

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<sup>260</sup> Gershman, “The Andrew Young Affair.”

<sup>261</sup> Gershman, “The Andrew Young Affair.”

### Chapter 3

#### **Dissolution and Disillusion (2010-2020)**

The Black-Jewish coalition in the United States reached its nadir in the 1980's and 1990's. Tensions bubbled over in the 1991 uprising in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, during which an Afro-Caribbean and Hassidic Jewish population clashed over local incidents of harm.<sup>262</sup> Subsequently, Israel and the United States underwent a number of critical changes that fundamentally rewrote the rules of engagement and the parameters of Israel/Palestine discourse between white Jews and Black non-Jews. While many of the major representative organizations that once held together the Black-Jewish coalition<sup>263</sup> remain in relationship with one another, they have generally shifted rightward<sup>264</sup> and fallen from their 20th

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<sup>262</sup> The 1991 Crown Heights riots began after one of the cars in the motorcade of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, accidentally ran over and killed a Guyanese child, Gavin Cato. In the wake of the fatal accident, a group of Black youths attacked and killed Australian Jewish student Yankel Rosenbaum.

<sup>263</sup> I was unable to find any official or unofficial statements by the NAACP, National Urban League, or the new SCLC that speak to their contemporary positions on Israel.

<sup>264</sup> Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 249-251.

century fame.<sup>265</sup> Even those like the NAACP or the ADL that have sustained some of their relevance in the public eye, have been overshadowed by the reclamation of leaderless, mass movements over organizational affiliation and representation.<sup>266</sup> Because this history is unfolding on a daily basis, the scholarship on the current state of affairs is limited and slow to emerge. In my analysis of the contemporary chapter of Israel's role in Black-Jewish relations, I draw on the available academic scholarship, the voices of the current movements most loudly and visibly in conversation with one another, and opinion pieces from ordinary individuals in the Black and Jewish press.

Perhaps one of the most significant changes in the American Jewish community since the 1970's is the evolution of the conversation around Israel and Zionism. While confirmed or *suspected* anti-Zionists amongst American Jewry continue to risk communal exile,<sup>267</sup> it is no longer considered total heresy for Jews to criticize Israel. Though American Jews remain largely unified on Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, their stances on Israeli political issues are unprecedentedly heterogenous.<sup>268</sup> Concurrently, as American Jewry becomes more liberal and progressive on Israel related issues, approximately 64% of Israeli Jews aged 18-34 identify as right wing, according to the 2018 Israeli Democracy Index.<sup>269</sup> This has led to unparalleled intra-community ideological polarization between Israeli and Diaspora Jews in the United States. For

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<sup>265</sup> Michael Fletcher, "NAACP Searches for Relevance in Era Defined by Black Lives Matter and Trump," *The Undeclared*, July 24, 2017. <https://theundefeated.com/features/naacp-searches-for-relevance-in-era-defined-by-Black-lives-matter-and-trump/>.

<sup>266</sup> Sarah Ruiz-Grossman, "Millennials are the Footsoldiers of the Resistance," *HuffPost*, February, 23, 2017. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-protest-poll\\_n\\_58addc16e4b0d0a6ef47517e](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-protest-poll_n_58addc16e4b0d0a6ef47517e).

<sup>267</sup> "About Us," Canary Mission, accessed March 2020, <https://canarymission.org/about>.

<sup>268</sup> American Jewish Committee (AJC), "2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion," June 2, 2019, <https://www.ajc.org/news/survey2019>.

<sup>269</sup> Laura Adkins and Ben Sales, "The Kids are All Right-Wing: How Israel's Younger Voters Have Grown More Conservative Over Time," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.jta.org/2019/04/10/israel/not-ready-younger-right-wing-voters>.

example, in the American Jewish Committee’s 2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion poll, 59% of American Jews “somewhat” or “strongly” *disapproved* of President Donald Trump’s approach to US-Israel relations. When asked the same question, 79% of Israelis expressed *approval*.<sup>270</sup>

While in the 1960’s and 1970’s, American Jewish support for a Palestinian state might have been tantamount to apostasy, today it is rather common place, even in the mainstream. In the same 2019 poll, 64% of respondents indicated that they “somewhat favor” or “favor strongly” a two-state solution.<sup>271</sup> Additionally, 66% of American Jewish respondents expressed approval of a partial or total dismantling of Jewish settlements in the West Bank for the purposes of a peace agreement with the Palestinians<sup>272</sup> (compared to 50% of Israelis who felt there should be *no* dismantling of settlements at all).<sup>273</sup> These slow but astronomical discursive changes among American Jews have blurred once very distinct political positions along a sharp Zionist or anti-Zionist party line. For example, it is now possible for a liberal American Jew to openly criticize the military occupation of the West Bank, while also supporting legislation to criminalize the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)<sup>274</sup> movement that seeks to resist it. Such a position is reflected in the policy platforms of J Street,<sup>275</sup> a renowned mainstream liberal advocacy group working to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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<sup>270</sup> AJC, “2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion.”

<sup>271</sup> AJC, “2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion.”

<sup>272</sup> AJC, “2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion.”

<sup>273</sup> American Jewish Committee (AJC), “2019 Survey of Israeli Jewish Opinion,” June 2, 2019, <https://www.ajc.org/news/survey2019./Israel>.

<sup>274</sup> Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, the Palestinian-led BDS movement established in 2005 calls on the global community to interrupt Israel’s treatment of Palestinians through organized boycott, divestment, and sanctions of its institution, companies, and the State at large.

<sup>275</sup> “Policy: Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (BDS): J Street policy principles on the Global BDS Movement and boycotts, divestment and sanctions efforts,” J Street, accessed March 2020, [https://jstreet.org/policy/boycott-divestment-and-sanctions-bds/#.Xm\\_SBvLYp0R](https://jstreet.org/policy/boycott-divestment-and-sanctions-bds/#.Xm_SBvLYp0R).



To Jews and non-Jews further to the left, J Street and others' rejection of BDS (a nonviolent resistance movement) would be seen as complacent (at best) in upholding Israeli policies toward Palestinians. Even with this critique in mind, it is clear that the spectrum of acceptable Israel positions within the American Jewish community has expanded dramatically.<sup>276</sup> As a consequence of this thickening of ideological possibilities, what was once a clear intra- and inter- community dialogue is now obscured.<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, the tremendous growth in visibility of Black Jewish Americans has amplified previously unheard, yet critical voices, forcing white Jews and Black non-Jews to contend with inconvenient truths and nuance.<sup>278</sup>

Yet another significant change in the liberal and left discourse since the 1990's has been the growth of intersectionality as a theoretical framework to understand and navigate identities under systems of oppression. Coined by distinguished Black feminist and legal scholar, Kimberle' Crenshaw, intersectionality asserts that each component of one's identity (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.) is compounded by the others in interlocking and interdependent systems of oppression and privilege.<sup>279</sup> For example, a Black Jewish woman's

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<sup>276</sup> This is evidenced by the acceptance of the "two-state solution" by the Reform and Conservative movements who represent the majority of American Jews. We have also seen the growing popularity of organizations like Encounter and Extend, who take Jewish leaders to Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank to hear Palestinian narratives first-hand. Lastly, this change is reflected in the expressed commitments to teach "diverse narratives" and "multiple voices" in major institutions of Jewish learning, like the Reform and Conservative rabbinical schools, the Jewish Education Project, the iCenter, the Shalom Hartman Institute, and Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools, to name a few.

<sup>277</sup> Many of these changes began with the establishment of Breira in 1973, who worked to encourage Jewish dialogue about Palestinian human rights and introduced the idea of a two-state solution to the American Jewish community. After their eventual downfall due to a Jewish right-wing smear campaign, the New Jewish Agenda emerged in the 1980's. As "the Jewish voice among progressives and the progressive voice among Jews," they were first to oppose the Lebanon war and organized a petition to freeze Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank (which made it to the floor of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in 1983).

<sup>278</sup> Nylah Burton, "Black Jews are Being Chased Out of the Jewish Community by Racism: Here are their Stories," *The Forward*, August 23, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/408769/Black-jews-are-being-chased-out-of-the-jewish-community-by-racism-here-are/>.

<sup>279</sup> Jane Coaston, "The Intersectionality Wars," *Vox*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>.

life experience differs greatly from that of Black men by virtue of her gender, from white women by virtue of her race, and non-Jews by virtue of her religious tradition. In addition to antisemitism, she experiences racialized sexism and gendered racism, within the Jewish community and beyond. The explosion of intersectionality into mainstream parlance has introduced a lot of internal confusion and frustration for white Jews, with respect to both racial location and what they believe to be Zionism's rightful place in the conversation. While they can't deny the fact of their skin color, many white Jews continue to identify as nonwhite or "off white." Thousands of years of antisemitism have left them feeling categorically different from the average white person, even after generations of assimilation and upward mobility that have afforded them many of the privileges of whiteness in a white supremacist paradigm. Given their unshakable sense of otherness, many are reluctant to abdicate their seat at the table among the systematically oppressed, especially in progressive political spaces where it is common for privileged voices to take a backseat to more marginalized ones.<sup>280</sup> However, from the point of view of many people of color, white Jews long ago relinquished many parts of their ethno-cultural specificity in exchange for access to Americanness vis-a-vis whiteness. The words of Black educator and psychologist, Kenneth Clark, still ring true:

*"Many Negroes, rightly or wrongly, see the struggle of Jews in American society as primarily a conservative one, to consolidate gains already made; and secondarily to expand those gains to a higher level of economic, political, educational and social integration with the dominant group. Many Negroes are disinclined to view American Jews' struggles as fundamental or as critical as their own - the struggle of the Jew is after all not one of life and death, to wring from society the bare necessities of life."*<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> For an interesting discussion of white Jews and intersectionality, see David Schraub's "White Jews: An Intersectional Approach," *AJS Review*, Vol. 43, Issue 2, (November 2019): 379-407. Explore footnote 13 for various, opposing Jewish think-pieces on intersectionality, whiteness, and Zionism.

<sup>281</sup> Herbert Hill, "Black-Jewish Conflict in the Labor Context: Race, Jobs, and Institutional Power," in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict*, ed. V.P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold M. Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 289.

Whatever racial or ethnic distinction remains between white Jews and other white people remain largely irrelevant to many people of color, for whom skin color *is* a matter of life and death. This confusion and tension among white Jews is captured by acclaimed Black feminist, bell hooks, in her observations of white Jewish college students:

*“It was hard and painful for some Jewish students to acknowledge that in a white supremacist society like the United States, where race/ethnicity is often defined solely by skin color, the fact of whiteness can subsume allegiance to Jewish identity, religion, etc. and overdetermine one’s actions in daily life or how one is treated...they are convinced that if they choose not to identify as ‘white’ no one will see them that way...it was the denial of this reality that made it possible for Jewish students to be complicit with racism and remain unaware of the nature of that participation.”*<sup>282</sup>

Furthermore, because American Jewish identity typically includes a relationship to Israel,<sup>283</sup> and because many Jews don’t differentiate between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, criticisms of Israel are often seen as perpetuating Jewish oppression. Under such a premise, intersectionality fails the Jews. According to this point of view, Zionism is a resistance movement and response to global antisemitism, a right to self-determination afforded to all other marginalized groups. As was the case in the 1960’s and 1970’s, many non-Jews, particularly those of color, understand contemporary Zionism to be the nationalization of white Jewish privilege used to justify violence against Palestinians. Clearly, each group is employing the same language of justice, resistance, and intersectionality to have two radically different conversations.

As far as Black-Jewish relations are concerned, noteworthy Israel-specific tensions didn’t reemerge until the 2010’s. In the interim years, two critical events dramatically reconfigured the political landscape of Israel and the United States, namely, 9/11 and the Second Intifada

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<sup>282</sup> bell hooks, “Keeping a Legacy of Shared Struggle,” in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1994), 230.

<sup>283</sup> AJC, “2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion.”

(September 2000-February 2005).<sup>284</sup> Each society was irrevocably scarred by new forms and scales of terrorism, and each were uncompromising in their partnership to lead the “War on Terror.” For Americans, this post-9/11 paradigm shift was one of mass hysteria. What began during the “War on Drugs” dramatically expanded during the “War on Terror” - namely, a striking expansion of the carceral and security state through the surveillance industry, over-policing of marginalized communities, hyper-militarization of police forces, and a general resurgence of overt racism that had been lurking in the shadows.<sup>285</sup>

For Israelis, the Second Intifada was an unparalleled chapter of civilian-based violence through suicide bombings, leading to a tightened grip on Palestinian life, a reinforcement of Israel’s claim that military occupation is a necessary evil, and an inflated security state.<sup>286</sup> Together, the United States and Israel began ferociously combatting Islamic terrorism, with unforeseen consequences reigning down on the domestic American Black-Jewish relationship.

In 2006, another critical moment in Israeli history fundamentally changed the nature of the conversation: the Palestinian parliamentary defeat of the PLO-affiliated Fatah with the election of Hamas, an internationally recognized Islamic terrorist organization that assumed governance over the Gaza strip. While violent resistance was always a component of the Palestinian freedom struggle, its formal coupling with radical Islam complicated the conversation in America, particularly in light of 9/11. Of course, security was always of great concern to Israel

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<sup>284</sup> The Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, broke out at the end of September 2000 after the collapse of Camp David and Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon’s highly provocative visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, sparking demonstrations and widespread violence.

<sup>285</sup> Arthur Rizer and Joseph Hartman, “How the War on Terror has Militarized the Police,” *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/how-the-war-on-terror-has-militarized-the-police/248047/>.

<sup>286</sup> Lori Allen, “Getting by the Occupation: How Violence Became Normal during the Second Palestinian Intifada,” *Cultural Anthropology Vol. 23 Issue 3* (August 2008): 453-487.

and its US ally, but this change signaled a new degree of threat. After 9/11 and the Second Intifada, critiques of Israeli policies toward Palestinians could be more easily dismissed in light of the perceived meta-threat of radical Islam. Anti-Zionism could now theoretically be understood by some as complicity in terrorism, and by extension, an existential threat to Israel, democracy, global Jewry, and perhaps America, too.

### **Ferguson and Operation Protective Edge - Where the Struggles Converged**

The seeds of a renewed Black-Palestinian reciprocal solidarity were sown after the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen year-old Black teenager from Florida, whose death sparked the birth of the national racial justice movement, Black Lives Matter. Across the globe, Palestinians painted Trayvon's face and solidarity messages on the West Bank security wall (or "apartheid wall," as it is known by some) erected during the Second Intifada.<sup>287</sup> A photo made its way through Black and Palestinian circles of a Palestinian man standing in front of olive groves carrying a sign that read, "Palestinians stand with those who mourn Trayvon Martin's death. We know what it feels like to lose loved ones and to watch the murderers evade justice."<sup>288</sup>

In 2014, the political landscape of the United States was shaken yet again by the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Black Americans of all political stripes erupted in protest over police brutality and the racist power structures that allowed the officer to evade consequences. Protestors in Ferguson

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<sup>287</sup> Many in the Palestinian solidarity camp refer to this as the Apartheid Wall, as it has turned many Palestinian towns into isolated enclaves, cut off communities and families from each other, separated farmers from their land and Palestinians from their places of work, and has curtailed Palestinian's freedom of movement.

<sup>288</sup> Sa'ed Atshan and Darnell Moore, "Reciprocal Solidarity: Where the Black and Palestinian Queer Struggles Meet," *Biography*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring 2014): 700.

faced a fully militarized police force in tactical combat gear. Armored vehicles and plumes of tear gas enveloped residential streets.<sup>289</sup> As images of beaten Black protesters plastered American television screens and Facebook feeds, messages of solidarity came pouring in from the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinians, themselves in the midst of a war with Israel, began a public solidarity campaign to share practical knowledge gleaned from clashes with the Israeli army and police, such as how to combat the effects of tear gas.<sup>290</sup> One Tweet and hundreds of others like it read, “#Ferguson: The tear gas used against you was probably tested on us first by Israel. No worries, stay strong. Love #Palestine.”<sup>291</sup> In fact, the tear gas used on both populations was made by the same US company, Combined Tactical Systems.<sup>292</sup>

Back in Gaza, the Palestinians were in the throws of an Israeli ground invasion that they called Operation Protective Edge. In the summer of 2014, three Israeli settler teens in the West Bank were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas affiliates. To avenge their blood, three Israeli settlers kidnapped a Palestinian boy and burned him alive,<sup>293</sup> leading to violent civil unrest. The search for the Israeli teens’ killers, the backlash from the revenge-killing, and an intensification of rocketfire from Hamas operatives in the south precipitated a fifty-day Israeli military operation in Gaza. This ground invasion ended in the deaths of over two thousand Palestinians,

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<sup>289</sup> Nadine El-Enany, “Ferguson and the Politics of Policing Radical Protest,” *Law Critique* 26 (March 2015): 3-6.

<sup>290</sup> Cristina Mislán and Sara Shaban, “‘To Ferguson, Love Palestine’: Mediating Life Under Occupation,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* (April 2019).

<sup>291</sup> Mark Molloy, “Palestinians Tweet Tear Gas Advice to Protesters in Ferguson,” *The Telegraph*, (August 15, 2014), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11036190/Palestinians-tweet-tear-gas-advice-to-protesters-in-Ferguson.html>

<sup>292</sup> Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, (Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 140.

<sup>293</sup> Lizzie Dearden, “Mohammed Abu Khdeir Murder: Israeli Man Convicted of Burning Palestinian Teenager to Death in Revenge Killing,” *The Independent*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mohammed-abu-khdeir-murder-israeli-man-convicted-of-burning-palestinian-teenager-to-death-in-revenge-a6991251.html>.

many of whom were civilians.<sup>294</sup> Black protesters and Palestinians used Twitter to draw direct parallels between the American police state and Israeli military control, under which, as Professor Timothy Seidel describes, “vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.”<sup>295</sup> Soon, no Black Lives Matter protest was complete without signs like “From Ferguson to Palestine.”

These two simultaneous struggles reinvigorated the internationalist notion of comparable oppression and organic similarities between the experiences of American Black people and Palestinians. This can be seen in their shared claims of unlivable conditions, disciplining of Black and brown bodies, repressive surveillance, militarization, and a discourse of victim-blaming.<sup>296</sup> In the realm of policing, the United States and Israel share technology, training, and know-how. Facilitated by organizations like the American Jewish Committee and the ADL, thousands of the highest ranking US police officials and law enforcement executives, such as ICE, Customs and Border Patrol, Air Marshals, Navy officers, Homeland Security Directors, and FBI agents have participated in exchange programs to share tactics and technologies for crowd control and counterterrorism.<sup>297</sup>

Following the murder of Michael Brown, the Department of Justice conducted an investigation into the Ferguson police department as well as the county police. The investigation focused mostly on the department under St. Louis County Police Chief, Timothy Fitch, and the years following his retirement. They found patterns of excessive force, as well as a quickness to

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<sup>294</sup> Mislán and Shaban, “To Ferguson, Love Palestine,” 3.

<sup>295</sup> Timothy Seidel, “‘Occupied Territory is Occupied Territory’: James Baldwin, Palestine and the Possibilities of Transnational Solidarity,” *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 37 Issue 9, (July 2016): 1650.

<sup>296</sup> Kristian Davis Bailey, “Black–Palestinian Solidarity in the Ferguson–Gaza Era,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 67 No. 4 (December 2015) 1017-1026.

<sup>297</sup> Alice Sperti, “Israel Security Forces are Training American Cops Despite History of Rights Abuses,” *The Intercept*, September 15 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/15/police-israel-cops-training-adl-human-rights-abuses-dc-washington/>.

use militarized crowd control methods before exhausting other de-escalation strategies.<sup>298</sup> In 2011, Fitch went on an ADL National Counter-Terrorism Seminar to Israel, during which he and his colleagues learned from various policing bodies with reputations of pervasive racism. For example, the Israeli National Police has a track record of racial profiling<sup>299</sup> and the counter-terrorism and riot control police unit, Yasam,<sup>300</sup> has a record of assaulting unarmed protesters. Absent direct testimony from Timothy Fitch, it cannot be confirmed what he learned behind closed doors. However, other participants of the same seminar reflected on their learning about riot control tactics and extreme surveillance practices,<sup>301</sup> and these agencies' reputations precede them.<sup>302</sup> Furthermore, the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department used Israeli-created crowd control technology to quell the protests in Ferguson. Developed by the Israeli Police and manufactured by Israeli company Odortec, "Skunk," is a foul-smelling liquid designed to cause nausea that is sprayed at high pressure onto protesters, where it lingers for days on clothing, skin, and in the air.<sup>303</sup> In Israel, Skunk is sprayed by the Israeli military into stores, schools, houses, yards, and fruit orchards of communities whose members participate in demonstrations.<sup>304</sup> Based

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<sup>298</sup> "Deadly Exchange in Focus: Participant Profiles: Learn," Deadly Exchange, accessed March 2020, <https://deadlyexchange.org/participant-profiles/>.

<sup>299</sup> Noam Rotem, "60% of People Arrested by Israeli Police are Non-Jews," *+972 Magazine*, June 1, 2016, <https://www.972mag.com/60-of-people-arrested-by-israeli-police-are-non-jews/119696/>.

<sup>300</sup> Sawsan Khalife, "Praver protesters beaten, threatened with rape by Israeli police in Haifa," *Electronic Intifada*, December 17, 2013, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/praver-protesters-beaten-threatened-rape-israeli-police-haifa/13016>.

<sup>301</sup> Commenting on his visit to Jerusalem, Maine State Police Colonel, Roger Williams, said, "The group went to Jerusalem and saw the massive video surveillance system used by local police to keep the peace. [...] In Jerusalem, they have a system of 200 cameras, [...] In the old part of the city, they can follow you anywhere. [...] it was like Star Wars compared to what we do." (For more testimonies see <https://deadlyexchange.org/what-do-participants-say/>)

<sup>302</sup> "What Do Participants Say?: Learn," Deadly Exchange, accessed March 2020, <https://deadlyexchange.org/what-do-participants-say/>.

<sup>303</sup> "Deadly Exchange Full Report," Deadly Exchange, accessed March 2020, <https://deadlyexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Deadly-Exchange-Report.pdf>.

<sup>304</sup> "Deadly Exchange Full Report," Deadly Exchange, accessed March 2020, <https://deadlyexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Deadly-Exchange-Report.pdf>.



on its proven effectiveness of crowd control in West Bank protests, Israel markets Skunk to police units worldwide, including departments in the United States.<sup>305</sup> The American company Mistral Security reportedly began selling Skunk to US police departments, including the St. Louis Metropolitan Police. Mistral Security advertises the product as applicable to “border crossings, correctional facilities, demonstrations, and sit-ins.”<sup>306</sup>

In honor of the one year anniversary of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown and the fifty-day war in Gaza, activists with the Black Lives Matter movement visited the occupied West Bank on a solidarity trip for the first time. Soon after, they released the “2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine” signed by over one thousand prominent Black activists.<sup>307</sup> Citing Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Martin Luther King, the statement located the group as part of the continuation of the Black freedom struggle, one that “seeks to honor the legacy of Black internationalism and the historic solidarity between Black and Palestinian struggles as our movements enter a new chapter.”<sup>308</sup> In addition to calling for boycott, divestment, and sanctions, the group named racism, demonization, state control, and the language of force as the nexus of their lived experiences:

*“While we acknowledge that the apartheid configuration in Israel/Palestine is unique from the United States and South Africa, we continue to see connections between the situation of Palestinians and Black people. Israel’s widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians evokes the mass incarceration of Black people in the US, including the political imprisonment of our own revolutionaries.”<sup>309</sup>*

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<sup>305</sup> “Deadly Exchange Full Report,” Deadly Exchange, accessed March 2020, <https://deadlyexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Deadly-Exchange-Report.pdf>.

<sup>306</sup> “Deadly Exchange Full Report,” Deadly Exchange, accessed March 2020, <https://deadlyexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Deadly-Exchange-Report.pdf>.

<sup>307</sup> Fishbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 215.

<sup>308</sup> Fishbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 215.

<sup>309</sup> Seidel, “Occupied Territory is Occupied Territory,” 1652.

The choir of Black voices publicly calling for Palestinian freedom and autonomy has since expanded dramatically. In 2015, a collaborative video project was released under the hashtag #BlackPalestinianSolidarity, in which more than sixty Black and Palestinian artists and activists highlighted these themes of parallel experience with signs reading “Gaza stands with Ferguson” and “When I see them, I see us.”<sup>310</sup> Palestinian activist and human rights attorney, Noura Erakat, clarified that “the point is *not* to compare oppression, but the point here is that solidarity is a political decision on how to resist and how to survive in our respective fights for freedom.”<sup>311</sup> The crux of Black-Palestinian solidarity through the lens of Ferguson and the 2014 war in Gaza is encapsulated in the opening statement that accompanies the video:

*“Black-Palestinian solidarity is neither a guarantee nor a requirement - it is a choice. We choose to build with one another in a shoulder to shoulder struggle against state-sanctioned violence. A violence that is manifest in the speed of bullets and batons and tear gas that pierce our bodies. One that is latent in the edifice of law and concrete that work together to, physically and figuratively, cage us. We choose to join one another in resistance not because our struggles are the same but because we each struggle against the formidable forces of structural racism and the carceral and lethal technologies deployed to maintain them.”<sup>312</sup>*

Palestinians, too, borrowed from the legacy of Black activism to inspire their own liberation, even before the more dramatic resurgence brought on by the Ferguson era. For example, after graduating from Stanford University, newly equipped with a knowledge of Black history, Palestinian activist, Fadi Quran, began the “Palestinian Freedom Riders” in 2011. They peacefully boarded buses destined for settler-only roads, often met with force and detention by the military.<sup>313</sup> These renewed touchpoints of cross-cultural movement-building came directly into conflict with American Jewry in 2015.

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<sup>310</sup> Seidel, “Occupied Territory is Occupied Territory,” 1653.

<sup>311</sup> “Palestine Unbound,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 45 No. 2 (Winter 2016): 197-202.

<sup>312</sup> “About,” Black Palestinian Solidarity, accessed March 2020, <https://www.Blackpalestiniansolidarity.com/about.html>.

<sup>313</sup> Atshan and Moore, “Reciprocal Solidarity,” 698.

## **Movement for Black Lives Platform - A Semantics Game**

Perhaps the most distressful flashpoint between liberal and progressive Jews and Black non-Jews since the SNCC newsletter crisis of 1967 was the 2016 release of the Movement for Black Lives Platform. Organized by a united front of over fifty organizations, the statement delineated goals, policies, and demands to “end the war on Black people.”<sup>314</sup> Sandwiched between domestic policy proposals was a section that extended beyond US borders. The “Invest/Divest” portion of the platform explained that racist violence is an international phenomenon, and noted how millions of dollars of military aid for Israel would be better served toward a more just and equitable America if redistributed into poor communities. The platform outlined American complicity in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and called for an end to anti-BDS legislation under the protection of free speech.<sup>315</sup>

This alone would have been enough to cause an uproar in the American Jewish community, but the statement referred to Israel as an apartheid state and accused it of committing genocide against Palestinians.<sup>316</sup> Searing criticism and public damnation came pouring in immediately. By and large, American Jews, whether wounded or furious, felt these accusations were defamatory and minimized the historical and moral significance of those terms. Because “genocide” was coined to describe the Nazi Holocaust,<sup>317</sup> Jews feel a special ferocity about its meaning and use. In absence of any specification that the platform might be referring to a

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<sup>314</sup> “A Vision For Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice,” New Economy Coalition, accessed March 2020, <https://neweconomy.net/resources/vision-Black-lives-policy-demands-Black-power-freedom-and-justice>.

<sup>315</sup> “A Vision For Black Lives,” New Economy Coalition.

<sup>316</sup> “A Vision For Black Lives,” New Economy Coalition.

<sup>317</sup> Julia Rappaport, “Where Did the Word ‘Genocide’ Come From?” Facing History and Ourselves, November 3, 2014, <https://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/where-did-the-word-genocide-come-from>.

*cultural* genocide, (a disclaimer that might have softened, but certainly not thwarted Jewish backlash,) Jewish anger was bound to erupt over any comparisons to the crimes committed against them. The Boston Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) publically disassociated from the platform and those organizations and individuals who endorsed it, claiming that this perceived antisemitic vitriol eroded the goals and tactics for racial justice that Jews would otherwise champion.<sup>318</sup>

In an attempt to back both Israel and the Movement for Black Lives, ADL CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, condemned what he called an “erroneous broad brush conflating of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with civil and human rights abuses”<sup>319</sup> against Black people in the United States. He maintained, however, that there is “too much work to do in the hard fight to advance a shared agenda of equality, justice, and respect for human dignity”<sup>320</sup> to abandon the movement entirely. The ADL’s school lesson plans on Black Lives Matter were nevertheless promptly removed from its website.<sup>321</sup> Jewish organizations to the left of the ADL also expressed pain around the chosen language. Bend the Arc, a multi-pronged Jewish political organization fighting antisemitism and racial injustice in the United States, released a statement acknowledging that members of the Jewish community, including some within their own ranks, experienced “deep pain and outrage” over the language. However, in the same breath, they *also* publicly recognized “the pain and outrage felt by some members of the Movement for Black

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<sup>318</sup> Jeremy Burton and Adam Suttin, “JCRC Statement Regarding Black Lives Matter Platform: Statements,” Jewish Community Relations Council, August 3, 2016, <https://www.jcrcboston.org/jcrc-statement-regarding-Black-lives-matter-platform/>.

<sup>319</sup> Sahar Zivan and Robert Goldblum, “Threading the Needle on Black Lives Matter,” *The New York Jewish Week*, 10, August 12, 2016, <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/1812433199?accountid=9703>.

<sup>320</sup> Zivan and Goldblum, “Threading the Needle,” 10.

<sup>321</sup> Yair Rosenberg, “From Left to Right, Jewish Groups Condemn ‘Repellent’ Black Lives Matter Claim of Israeli ‘Genocide’,” *Tablet*, August 5, 2016, <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/210285/from-left-to-right-jewish-groups-condemn-repellent-Black-lives-matter-claim-of-israeli-genocide>.

Lives that prompted inclusion of this language in the first place. It is with sincere anguish that Bend the Arc holds these two realities simultaneously.”<sup>322</sup> *T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights*, a multi-denominational network of rabbis fighting for human rights in Israel and North America, also spoke out in frustration. Their statement read that “one can vigorously oppose occupation without resorting to terms such as ‘genocide’ and without ignoring the human rights violations of terrorist groups such as Hamas.”<sup>323</sup> The Union for Reform Judaism dismissed “wholeheartedly the notion that effective anti-racism work can only be done by denouncing and excoriating Israel.”<sup>324</sup> While acknowledging that “the Movement for Black Lives is working to address deeply rooted societal challenges” the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center referred to the rhetoric as “offensive and odious.”<sup>325</sup> Peter Beinart, one of the Jewish community’s loudest public critics of the occupation tweeted with what some might call an air of condescension, “@BlkLives matter has every right to criticize Israel. But ‘genocide’? Bring solidarity. Don’t bring stupid.”<sup>326</sup> The American Jewish Committee, hardly the representative body it once was, accused the Movement for Black Lives of “seeking to hijack” the Black Lives Matter movement with “a platform that evinces contempt and bigotry toward Jews.”<sup>327</sup> Leading American Jewish historian, Jonathan Sarna, commented, “I think the cause of Black Lives Matter was greatly harmed and future historians will say they put ideology ahead of the real needs of the

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<sup>322</sup> Zivan and Goldblum, “Threading the Needle,” 10.

<sup>323</sup> Zivan and Goldblum, “Threading the Needle,” 10.

<sup>324</sup> Emma Green, “Why Do Black Activists Care about Palestine?” *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/why-did-Black-american-activists-start-caring-about-palestine/496088/>.

<sup>325</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Jewish Groups Struggle for Nuance in Response to Black Lives Matter,” *The Forward*, August 6, 2016, <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/1814123690?accountid=9703>.

<sup>326</sup> Rosenberg, “From Left to Right.”

<sup>327</sup> Kestenbaum, “Jewish Groups Struggle for Nuance.”

African-American community.”<sup>328</sup> Such a sentiment, like others shared across American Jewry, calls back to decades past, wherein Jewish leaders expressed what some might call paternalistic and condescending notions of disappointment in the Black agenda and rhetoric, suggesting they feel more attuned to the Black people’s real interests than Black people themselves. Beyond their lamenting the alleged “tragedy” that the movement would somehow sacrifice its credibility, much of American Jewry felt that the platform was unequivocally incendiary, a perceived blood libel on a national scale. On the other hand, an increasing number of young progressive Jews supported it.

The history of the new Jewish left in America is being written as we speak, so we cannot yet determine who or what will have shaped the next zeitgeist in Israel discourse by 2030. As of now, however, the loudest and most visible Jewish voice against the occupation and in solidarity with Black people is IfNotNow, a national, pluralistic movement of young Jews fighting to end the American Jewish support for the occupation.<sup>329</sup> While IfNotNow would not have chosen to use the word genocide, according to co-founder Yonah Liberman, it unequivocally supported the platform.<sup>330</sup> Inserting a young grassroots Jewish voice into the conversation, IfNotNow affiliates Ally Little and Michelle Weiser wrote to the *Forward* in an article titled “Don’t Like Black Lives Matter? Get Ready to Lose Young Jews.” In it, they lambasted the Boston JCRC as a symbol of the out-of-touch Jewish leadership who “obstruct racial justice work, erase Black Jews, and attempt to maintain the status quo of Jews who are progressive on all issues except for Palestine...It’s *not eleven words in the platform but the occupation itself* that compromises the

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<sup>328</sup> Zivan and Goldblum, “Threading the Needle,” 11.

<sup>329</sup> “About,” IfNotNow, accessed March 2020, <https://www.ifnotnowmovement.org/about>.

<sup>330</sup> Kestenbaum, “Jewish Groups Struggle for Nuance.”

values and integrity of our community” (emphasis mine)<sup>331</sup> Little and Weiser asserted that, in its dismissal of the entire platform over its critique of Israel, the JCRC was,

*“complicit in perpetuating both racism and the occupation while standing in the way of Black liberation. The Jewish community can’t keep boasting about our involvement in the Civil Rights movement while giving half-hearted support to the Civil Rights movement alive on our streets today. We can’t let the knee-jerk dismissal of any criticism of Israel for white Jews to choose between being part of the Jewish community and standing with Black lives.”*<sup>332</sup>

Among the fifty organizations who cosigned the Movement for Black Lives Platform in its entirety, only one well known Jewish organization lent its name: Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). JVP is explicitly anti-Zionist as of 2018,<sup>333</sup> and its leaders and positions have been rejected as self-hating by mainstream American Jewry since its founding. Nevertheless, their brand recognition and membership have continued to grow, with six thousand new members in 2019.<sup>334</sup> As the lone notable Jewish organization to unconditionally cosign the platform, it is critical to learn their motivations in their own words. In a 2016 article to *The Nation*, JVP leadership made the case for American Jewish support for the platform. They dismissed mainstream Jewish notions that Black people should only concern themselves with Black issues, writing that “while the focus is, as it should be, on self-determination and the kinds of policies necessary to undo centuries of enslavement and disenfranchisement of Black people in the United States, the scope of the platform reflects a fierce insistence on the possibility of transforming our world into one where the full humanity and dignity of all oppressed people can

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<sup>331</sup> Ally Little and Michelle Weiser, “Don’t Like Black Lives Matter? Get Ready to Lose Young Jews,” *Forward*, August 19, 2016, <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/1814123735?accountid=9703>.

<sup>332</sup> Little and Weiser, “Don’t Like Black Lives Matter?”

<sup>333</sup> “Our Approach to Zionism,” Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed March 2020, <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/zionism/>.

<sup>334</sup> “Jewish Voice for Peace Annual Report 5779,” Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed March 2020, [http://report.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/?\\_ga=2.254050432.902381952.1583187487-797139824.1583187487](http://report.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/?_ga=2.254050432.902381952.1583187487-797139824.1583187487).

be realized.”<sup>335</sup> While much of American Jewry condemned the platform for singling out Israel, these leaders highlighted that, while Israel is in fact the highest recipient of military aid, the document *also* named abuses in the Congo, Honduras, Libya, Somalia, and Haiti, among others.<sup>336</sup> JVP leaders also denounced Jewish institutional backlash to the word choices in the document. They felt that critical attention had been diverted from an indispensable conversation about Jewish culpability in helping to uphold structural racism and their moral responsibility to end it. According to JVP, the Jewish community centered its own emotions and history rather than listening to Black leaders who recognized their own oppression in the lives of Palestinians.<sup>337</sup> According to this critique, Jewish leaders were continuing the legacy of pervasive gatekeeping that has and continues to prevent Black leaders from articulating opinions about Israel as a matter of their personal or group concern. In a scathing critique of white Jews, JVP leadership wrote,

*“One of the most essential acts of solidarity white people can offer as allies to people of color is to listen, truly and deeply, without attempting to control or limit what is said, or make their own feelings the center of attention -- especially when it makes them uncomfortable or forces them to question their assumptions or their access to privilege and power. The rush by organizations largely led by white Jews to publicly criticize and reject the platform fails this test by insisting that Jewish fears, based on particular, primarily Ashkenazi experiences of the past, are more important than the sovereign rights of Black people to their full liberation, and by making Jewish support conditional on silence about Palestine.”<sup>338</sup>*

JVP criticized the Jewish community for monopolizing the emotive and galvanizing

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<sup>335</sup> Ilise Benshushan Cohen, Aurora Levins Morales, and Rebecca Vilkomerson, “American Jews Should Support the Movement for Black Lives Platform,” *The Nation*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/american-jews-should-support-the-movement-for-Black-lives-platform/>.

<sup>336</sup> Benshushan Cohen, Levins Morales, Vilkomerson, “American Jews.”

<sup>337</sup> Benshushan Cohen, Levins Morales, Vilkomerson, “American Jews.”

<sup>338</sup> Benshushan Cohen, Levins Morales, Vilkomerson, “American Jews.”



power of the term “genocide.”<sup>339</sup> Jews became the sole arbiter of what does and doesn’t “count,” even in the face of grave injustices against Palestinians that demand urgent attention.<sup>340</sup>

Although Black Jews have remained largely outside the scope of this thesis, I feel called to include their voices on this particular issue. Black Jews, like white Jews, exist along a diverse spectrum of political orientations toward Israel and have varying approaches to this particular political platform. While the Jews of Color Caucus of JVP may only represent a small corner of that spectrum, they offer an important point in their claim that certain white Jewish positions on the platform could be said to “convey the message that the lives of Black Jews (along with Black gentiles) directly affected by US police brutality are less important than protecting Israel from scrutiny.”<sup>341</sup>

In the years since the major conflict over the Movement for Black Lives Platform, a number of seemingly small incidents once again inflamed Black-Jewish tensions. In November 2018, Temple University media studies professor and CNN contributor, Marc Lamont Hill, was fired from CNN within twenty-four hours of delivering an impassioned speech about Palestinian freedom to the United Nations.<sup>342</sup> Hill invoked ethnic cleansing and settler colonialism in detailing Israel’s documented human rights abuses. He also discussed the United States’ aiding and abetting Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu’s indifference to international scorn,

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<sup>339</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, General Assembly 260A, (12 January 1951), [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf).

<sup>340</sup> Some could and do argue that Israeli actions toward Palestinians do, in fact, meet elements of the “genocide” criteria laid out by the UN.

<sup>341</sup> Benschushan Cohen, Levins Morales, Vilkomerson, “American Jews.”

<sup>342</sup> Eli Rosenberg, “CNN Fires Marc Lamont Hill in Wake of Remarks Criticizing Israel and Calling for a ‘Free Palestine’,” *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/29/cnn-fires-marc-lamont-hill-wake-remarks-criticizing-israel-calling-free-palestine/>.

expressed support for the BDS movement, and described a framework for Black-Palestinian solidarity in the post-Ferguson era.<sup>343</sup> His call for a “free Palestine from the river to the sea” sparked outrage in the pro-Israel camp, as this phrase has been used by Hamas in its calls for Israel’s destruction. In response to an explosion of media backlash, Hill tweeted, “At no point did I endorse, support, or even mention Hamas. This is dishonest...I was very clear in my comments about desiring freedom, justice, and self-determination for EVERYONE.”<sup>344</sup> He went on to clarify that the ‘river to the sea’ phrase dates to the early 20th century and “has never been the exclusive province of a particular ideological camp.”<sup>345</sup> Meanwhile, as critics have pointed out, Republican Senator and paid CNN contributor, Rick Santorum, remains on the payroll, even after claiming on the air that Palestinians are an “invented people.”<sup>346</sup> Organizations like the ADL deemed Hill’s comments divisive and destructive, but IfNotNow loudly called for his reinstatement,

*“We are demanding that CNN reinstate Marc Lamont Hill because advocating for Palestinian rights should NOT be a fireable offense. In supporting Palestinian freedom, Marc Lamont-Hill was in no way being anti-semitic... Once again we are seeing the American Jewish establishment censor conversations about Palestinian rights by falsely claiming antisemitism, and it is setting a terrifying precedent.”<sup>347</sup>*

A few months later, another distinguished Black figure was publicly reprimanded for her unconditional support for the Palestinians. In January 2019, longtime Black activist and global-

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<sup>343</sup> Marc Lamont Hill, “Our Solidarity Must Become a Verb,” Transcript printed at *Jacobin*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/12/marc-lamont-hill-united-nations-palestine-speech-transcript>.

<sup>344</sup> Rosenberg, “CNN Fires Marc Lamont Hill.”

<sup>345</sup> Rosenberg, “CNN Fires Marc Lamont Hill.”

<sup>346</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Rick Santorum Claims that No Palestinian Lives in the West Bank,” *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/rick-santorums-claim-that-no-palestinian-lives-on-the-west-bank/2012/01/04/gIQAcxsIbP\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/rick-santorums-claim-that-no-palestinian-lives-on-the-west-bank/2012/01/04/gIQAcxsIbP_blog.html).

<sup>347</sup> @IfNotNowOrg, “IfNotNow Calls on CNN to Reinstate Marc Lamont Hill Immediately: Advocating for Palestinian Human Rights is not a Fireable Offense,” December 1, 2018, <https://twitter.com/IfNotNowOrg/status/1068959389472735234>.

left hero, Angela Davis, was granted the Fred Shuttlesworth Human Rights Award to honor her legacy and raise funds for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. After an uproar from the local Jewish community, the event was cancelled and her award revoked, as her statements and public record on Israel did not "meet all of the criteria on which the award is based."<sup>348</sup> Upon inquiry into the change of events, Davis was told that her longtime support for Palestinians and support for BDS were an issue.<sup>349</sup> In a public statement, the institute mentioned it had heard from "concerned individuals and organizations" in late December, around the time *Southern Jewish Life* magazine published a critical piece by editor Larry Brook about granting Davis the award.<sup>350</sup>

While the Marc Lamont Hill and Angela Davis incidents were short-lived in the headlines, they each highlight the complex particulars that animate the Black-Jewish relationship of decades past and present: the increasingly loud and unapologetic resurgence of the Black left's advocacy for the Palestinian struggle, and the white Jewish power to punish or silence it.

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<sup>348</sup> Sherrell Wheeler Stewart, "Civil Rights Award Rescinded From Angela Davis After Jewish Community Objections," NPR, January 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/08/683250815/civil-rights-award-rescinded-from-angela-davis-after-jewish-community-objections>.

<sup>349</sup> Wheeler Stewart, "Civil Rights Award Rescinded From Angela Davis."

<sup>350</sup> Niraj Chokshi, "Angela Davis Says She's 'Stunned' After Award Is Revoked Over Her Views on Israel," *New York Times*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/us/angela-davis-israel-civil-rights-institute.html>.

## Afterword

### Personal Conclusions and Offerings for a Brighter Future

As was the case in the 1960's and 1970's, the contemporary relationship between white Jews and Black non-Jews with respect to Israel is clearly rather fraught. In my assessment, it is shaped by misguidedness, miscalculation, and missed opportunities between peoples of dramatically different social, economic, and political capital. White Jews and Black non-Jews once found themselves in shared spaces, either by choice or by the forces of white supremacy. Today, however, these communities hardly intersect beyond college campuses or the remaining legacy organizations with enough shared values to show up to the table. Until this point, I have attempted to offer a contextual synthesis of seventy years of complex and often ambiguous history. Informed by my research and personal experience as a white Jewish leftist, I now feel called to share what I view as critical work for the rehabilitation of this fraught relationship in the interest of dismantling white supremacy and creating a safe, equitable future for all peoples.

It is with ample disclaimers and humility as a white Jew of tremendous privilege that I offer the following critiques to Black non-Jews regarding Israel/Palestine: I believe it is impossible to have the critically necessary conversation about violent Israeli policies toward Palestinians and its mirror in the US without acknowledging the consequences of Palestinian terrorism. I freely admit that, as Angela Davis puts it, “the validity of violence should be directed to those institutions that *hold a monopoly on violence*: the police, the prisons, and the military.” (emphasis mine)<sup>351</sup> I also agree that hyper-focusing on violent resistance by oppressed peoples in discussing issues like Israel/Palestine “inevitably serves to obscure the issues that are at the

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<sup>351</sup> Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 7.

center of struggles for justice.”<sup>352</sup> After all, Nelson Mandela, “who has been sanctified as the most important peace advocate of our times was kept on the US terrorist list until 2008.”<sup>353</sup> However, with *full reconition* that Israel’s military resources and support from the United States grossly outweigh what Palestinians could only dream of acquiring, and with *wholehearted acknowledgement* that violent resistance is often a response to the crushing weight of desparation, the Black Lives Matter movement must nevertheless be able to acknowledge the impact of stabbings, rockets, and suicide bombings on Israeli civilians. Even if the Black Lives Matter movement understands these tactics to be justified, as did the Black revolutionaries that preceded them, this basic recognition is *critical* in order to make more honest and complex comparisons between the US carceral state and Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. Drawing lines of connection on issues of private prisons, racial profiling, surveillance, hypermilitarization, and happy trigger-fingers is useful and warranted. But the choice to disregard the Palestinian resistance tactics against civilians that are *totally absent* in the sister struggle for Black freedom in the United States, means that principled arguments will go unheard by the white Jews who need to hear them. Lastly, if the Black Lives Matter movement and its allies are invested in being understood as anti-Zionist rather than antisemitic, it would be prudent to really investigate the difference and cultivate a deepened understanding of antisemitic tropes. The group Jews for Racial and Economic Justice is one of the leading voices of the Jewish left in the United States, and has created invaluable resources and trainings on antisemitism specifically for the purpose of durable, meaningful coalition-building across difference.

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<sup>352</sup> Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 8.

<sup>353</sup> Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 8.

Beyond the aforementioned suggestions, my primary role is to take responsibility for my own people, fellow white Jews. It is with the utmost respect for my community that I offer the following critiques in service of a stronger future for Black-Jewish relations.

First and foremost, white Jews must reckon with the reality of our whiteness. The eventual loss of the term “race” to describe Jews over time was a blessing and a curse, rendering “inarticulate some of the deepest feelings of group solidarity or difference” once known to us.<sup>354</sup> While we were granted large scale access to whiteness and its accompanying capital, the transition was wrought with alienation, communal breakdown, and psychic turmoil.<sup>355</sup> However, we must confront the basic truth that we took it and ran. Visible Jewish religiosity like that of Hassidic Jews *does*, in fact, increase one’s vulnerability to *interpersonal* violence,<sup>356</sup> but it *does not* diminish the fact of one’s *whiteness*. While there was once more overt and systemic antisemitism in the United States, white Jews as a distinct category of people no longer face *institutional* discrimination in housing, education, labor, health care, etc. As such, any claims of antisemitism toward Jews, particularly by Black non-Jews, must be viewed *contextually* through a *systemic lens*, as opposed to an interpersonal one.

I admit to my own surprise and personal pain at the degree of blurring anti-Zionism and antisemitism in some Black organizing spaces around Israel. However, rhetoric alone, particularly from those who have been forcibly silenced for centuries, holds a microscopic amount of power relative to the political and economic forces behind the American Jewish community and the pro-Israel lobby it supports. When white Jews hyperinflate the threat of Black antisemitism or make claims of reverse racism, they undermine their credibility and reveal

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<sup>354</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 6.

<sup>355</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 6.

<sup>356</sup> Liam Stack, “‘Most Visible Jews’ Fear Being Targets as Anti-Semitism Rises,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/nyregion/hasidic-jewish-attacks.html>.

their tone-deafness to the experiences of those with whom they claim to ally. Furthermore, we cannot assign disproportionate responsibility to overburdened Black people to uphold an unstable alliance or impose an ideological litmus test in order to “earn” Jewish support.

Secondly, as the global Israel/Palestine discourse grows to differentiate between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, (when the former is judiciously employed without classic antisemitic tropes), American Jewry, too, is called to make this distinction. In their dossier “Understanding Antisemitism,” the group Jews for Racial and Economic Justice writes,

*“Criticisms of Israel and Zionism are not inherently or inevitably anti-Jewish. All states, movements, and ideologies should be scrutinized, and all forms of injustice denounced. It is not anti-Jewish to denounce oppressive acts committed by Jews. On the contrary, insisting that a history of oppression exempts Jews—or any other group for that matter—from accountability undermines Jewish liberation and betrays our values.”<sup>357</sup>*

In the intersectional movements to end systemic oppression, Zionism, for contemporary Jews, is an *identity of choice*, an opted-into component of one’s Jewishness. Unlike race, class, or gender, there is no *essential right to protection* of Zionism vis-a-vis one’s Jewishness. In other words, intersectionality should automatically protect Jews as an ethno-religious group, because ethnicity and religion are axes of systemic oppression and privilege. *Political ideologies are not.* This would be true even if the manifestation of the Zionist project *had not* been realized through mass displacement. Furthermore, it might greatly benefit white American Jews in these conversations to honor the reality that the Zionism envisioned by their ancestors, well intended as they believe it to have been, is *not the Zionism proliferating on the ground*, and therefore deserves critical interrogation through the lens of those living under its rule.

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<sup>357</sup> “Understanding Antisemitism,” Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, accessed March 2020, <https://jfrej.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/JFREJ-Understanding-Antisemitism-November-2017-v1-3-2.pdf>.

Regarding the Movement for Black Lives platform, I share the knee-jerk discomfort over some of the rhetoric. However, I'd invite fellow white Jews to question the work we have done, or haven't done, to earn a seat at the table. If challenged to refrain from mentioning the names Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel,<sup>358</sup> Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, could ordinary white Jews list major Jewish leaders or efforts for racial justice since the 1960's? In the words of Orthodox Black Jewish writer, Shais Rashon (aka MaNishtana),

*“Don't get me wrong, I was as baffled as anyone else by the platform drafters' decision to dilute focus from the conditions of systemic racism here in America to wade into the murky waters of the Israel/Palestine debate. However, I was even more dismayed by those in the Jewish community who responded with strongly-worded repudiations of the Black Lives Matter movement without having ever made the same spirited declarations of support for it in the first place. I'm sorry, but people like that don't get a vote. You can't complain about the conversation if you haven't been a part of it...A lukewarm absence of antagonism against Black Lives Matter does not equal support or allyship....Because no player who sits on the bench for the whole game gets to complain about the score.”<sup>359</sup>*

Even if there was total consensus among American Jews that the rhetoric of the platform was categorically antisemitic, (and if we believe that antisemitism is a ubiquitous problem,) then Jews must accept that antisemitism will be found in organizations that nevertheless demand our support and commitment. As such, I believe it is incumbent upon us to *affirm without hesitation* that the dignity of Black lives and the inherent legitimacy of their movement should *never* be incumbent upon support for Israel. Solidarity does not and should not operate within an economy of gratitude, one in which resources are granted or withheld to the extent that Black resistance to oppression meets *our* needs. The scope and gravity of systemic racism against Black people in this country is incalculable—whether in labor, government, housing, healthcare, education,

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<sup>358</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century. He is especially known for his close relationship to Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights leadership in the American Jewish community during the 1960's.

<sup>359</sup> Shais Rashon, “Dear Jews, Black Lives Can't Only Matter When You're Criticizing the Movement,” *Tablet*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/210643/dear-jews-black-lives-cant-only-matter-when-youre-criticizing-the-movement>.



media, or criminal (in)justice, etc. As white American Jews have grown and continue to grow more financially and politically comfortable, what right have we to condition our support for the largest movement for racial justice on its support for Israel?

Lastly, white Jews must get clear on who poses the most serious threat to Jewish life in this country. In 2019, Black Muslim Congresswoman, Ilhan Omar, was voted “Antisemite of the Year” by the organization Stop Antisemitism.<sup>360</sup> They could have chosen President Donald Trump who accused Jews of dual loyalty and of voting with their pockets,<sup>361</sup> or the assailant who stabbed a rabbi and wounded five others in Monsey, NY,<sup>362</sup> or the shooter of a kosher market in Jersey City,<sup>363</sup> or any number of white supremacists who so loudly support the destruction of world Jewry.<sup>364</sup> Instead they selected a Black Muslim woman who stands publicly for Palestinians in her criticism of the Israel lobby in Washington.<sup>365</sup> In what I believe to be an egregiously misguided calculation of tremendous consequence to the Black-Jewish relationship, *she* was deemed enemy number one.

A strong, grounded coalition between white Jews and Black non-Jews in the 21st century, one that embraces the full complexity of the human beings it will serve, requires a humble

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<sup>360</sup> Amir Tibon, “Israel’s UN Envoy Calls for Action Against ‘Anti-Semite of the Year’ Ilhan Omar,” *Haaretz*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-israel-s-un-envoy-calls-ilhan-omar-anti-semite-of-the-year-1.8369471>.

<sup>361</sup> Eileen Sullivan, “Trump Again Accuses American Jews of Disloyalty,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/us/politics/trump-jews-disloyalty.html>.

<sup>362</sup> Rebecca Liebson, Neil Vigdor, Michael Gold and Eliza Shapiro, “5 Wounded in Stabbing at Rabbi’s home in N.Y. Suburb,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/nyregion/monsey-synagogue-stabbing-anti-semitic.html>.

<sup>363</sup> Jason Hanna and Madeline Holcombe, “Jersey City Shooters Fueled by Hatred of Jewish People and Law Enforcement, State Attorney General Says,” *CNN*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/12/us/jersey-city-new-jersey-shooting-thursday/index.html>.

<sup>364</sup> “ADL Tracker of Antisemitic Incidents: Research and Tools,” ADL, accessed March 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-tracker-of-anti-semitic-incidents>.

<sup>365</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Ilhan Omar’s Criticism Raises the Question: Is AIPAC too Powerful?” *New York Times*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/04/us/politics/aipac-congress-democrats.html>.

recognition of the past in order to rewrite a more honest future. Jewish tradition places a high premium on *tochecha* - the Jewish value of “loving rebuke.” In Genesis Rabbah 54:3, the rabbinic sage Reish Lakish states, “*reproof leads to peace; a peace where there has been no reproof is no peace.*”<sup>366</sup> In other words, criticism is a vitally necessary ingredient for meaningful relationships and coalitions if they are to withstand pain and conflict. In the work to dismantle white supremacy, each of us is called upon to give and receive criticism humbly and to demonstrate an unshakeable commitment to mutual accountability. Harm is built over time, and the work to repair harm will, too, take time. But when we wholeheartedly commit to the messiness of the work, we can unlock the potential for radical change, and build toward the world as it should be.

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<sup>366</sup> Genesis Rabbah 54:3, accessed March 2020, retrieved from [https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit\\_Rabbah.54.3?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.54.3?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en).

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