

Hot Sauce and Hummus

by *Patrick Dankwa John*

It seems that ever since Dr. King died, the relationship between Blacks and Jews has steadily eroded. Efforts to strengthen the relationship are being made, but progress seems to be moving at a glacial pace. Why so, and what can we do about it?

I heard a joke many years ago that may help us understand part of the problem. Imagine some small rural town about 100 years ago, before modern technology like TVs, phones, and computers. There was a teenage dance held in a big barn and lots of teenagers were there. There was a shy teenage boy who lost his eye in an accident when he was a toddler. In place of his real eye, there was a prosthetic eye in his eye socket. It was made of wood and painted to look like a real eye, but it was obvious to everyone that it was a fake wooden eye. He was self-conscious about his wooden eye. There was a self-conscious teenage girl there, too. She had a really big nose and, for years, the other kids would tease her about it. She was self-conscious about her big nose. The boy asked the girl to dance. He was nervous and sensitive to rejection. The girl was delighted that he asked her to dance. She said, "You're asking me to dance?!" The boy said "Yes, would you like to dance with me?" She said, "Oh boy, wouldn't I, wouldn't I!" The boy, misunderstanding what the girl meant, said, "Hey, you got some nerve, big nose, big nose!" They both felt insulted and they stormed out of the barn, leaving through different doors. They left the dance. This is what happens when we feel hurt, insulted, misunderstood. We leave the dance. We don't ask for clarification. We leave the dance. Blacks and Jews have both left the dance.

Dr. King developed a wonderful relationship with the Jewish community. He often spoke in synagogues, and Jewish donors are responsible for perhaps 75% of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's budget during the civil rights movement. Additionally, Jews marched in step with Dr. King, risking their own lives to stand up for Black liberation. Jewish teachers were welcomed at historically Black colleges and universities. So what happened to us?

Two things happened. First, the nature of discrimination changed. We went from open and notorious bigotry (e.g. big signs saying things like "No Blacks, No Jews, No Mexicans") to discrimination with a smile. The civil rights laws made most forms of bigotry illegal, but the law did nothing to change hearts. Add to this that the laws are difficult to enforce because of procedural, burden of proof, and privacy concerns. How do you know if you were denied a job because of illegal discrimination or for a legitimate reason? How would you know if you're being paid less for doing the same work as a co-worker from a different demographic group? If you do feel that you're the victim of discrimination on the job, you must show that the discrimination was "intentional." In other words, the law puts the burden on the victim to prove the accused acted with something akin to malice. This means the law puts no burden on dominant group members to have an affirmative duty to curb their implicit bias. Blacks can't hide. We can't change our name or accent to better assimilate. We have a yellow Star of David permanently affixed to our forehead. So while Jews were able to assimilate, Blacks were not. In other words, many Jews were able to join mainstream White society, leaving Blacks behind. This is not meant as a criticism, just an observation. Jews have every right to join the mainstream, and Blacks do exactly the same thing every chance we get. I'm just pointing out that with Jewish progress and Black stagnation, the two groups began to have less in common. There's nothing we can do about that problem.

The second problem is that, in trying to improve Black/Jewish relations, we have focused on our similarities too much. This is a problem we can fix. Of course we have some similar experiences, and we should talk about them. But we have talked about our similarities to the exclusion of what Dr. King acknowledged are "the towering differences between the Black experience and the Jewish experience." We don't talk enough about those towering differences, and how they inevitably lead to Blacks and Jews having different perspectives and different policy priorities. We have a lot of feel good moments with each other, but our unwillingness to openly and honestly discuss our towering differences has led to many wooden eye and big nose moments. There are two differences worth mentioning. First is that Jews have been the subject of genocidal campaigns for thousands of years. People have wanted to wipe Jews off the planet, simply because they're Jews. Generally speaking, that has not been the Black experience. Not only have Jews been the target of genocide, but those campaigns often seem to come out of nowhere, to have risen suddenly. And Jewish professional or financial success has never been sufficient to protect Jews from antisemitism. Jews were doing well in Germany just before the Holocaust. In fact, Jewish success is used by anti-semites to justify their antisemitism. Rather than attribute that success to hard work and sacrifice, anti-semites falsely claim that Jewish success was attained by fraud, theft, or deception. We can't tolerate antisemitism in the naïve belief that Jews don't need to be protected. We need to discuss how these experiences shaped the Jewish worldview in a way that would be alien to most Blacks. We need to discuss how these experiences shaped the Jewish worldview in a way that would be alien to most Blacks. Otherwise, Blacks will be tempted to dismiss Jewish concerns about antisemitism as paranoia, or worse, as an attempt by Jews to deflect any criticism of their community by feigning fear of antisemitism. Blacks need to understand that when Jews ask us to publicly denounce antisemitic statements made by respected and high-profile Blacks, such requests are the product of legitimate fears, not some perverse desire to control us. Blacks need to understand that Holocaust survivors felt betrayed by their neighbors and so-called friends who turned them in to the Nazis. So, it would be natural for Jews to be cautious about who they can trust. This is common sense, not paranoia.

Jews need to understand that the Black slave experience was very different from the Jewish slave experience. All slavery involves forced labor, but that's where the similarities end. Comparing slavery under Pharaoh to slavery under White supremacy is like comparing

someone who has a one-night stand to someone who runs a sex trafficking ring. They both may involve intimate relations, but the nature and scope are so different that any comparison is unhelpful. Jews need to understand the uniqueness of our slavery and how it affected us and still affects us. The Bible says that Pharaoh enslaved the Jews because he was afraid they would join with his enemies and rise up against him.

There's no hint of the Egyptians viewing Jews as inherently inferior people. In fact, all throughout history, people have tried to force Jews to assimilate. The Babylonians tried. The Greeks tried. The Romans tried. Lord knows the Christians tried. With Blacks it's the opposite—we've been trying to assimilate and we're being excluded because we are supposedly inherently inferior—unfit to be anything other than slaves or prisoners. The Bible says that upon leaving Egypt, the Jews, with God's help, plundered the Egyptians of their wealth (Exodus 12:36), but even today Blacks are still waiting for reparations. The Jews had 40 years of wilderness roaming to be away from the direct influence of their former captors, to adjust to their freedom, to learn how to govern themselves, and for their older members to die of old age, taking their ambivalent feelings about Egypt with them. Blacks were set free and left illiterate and penniless among our former slave masters. Because our slavery was based on our physical appearance, we continue to be easy marks. Various oppressors banned Jews from reading the Torah, but Blacks were banned from learning to read anything—it was illegal to teach us to read or write. Many Jews bravely lost their lives rather than lose their faith. Blacks were brought here and ripped from our native land so, when our children were born, they were born in the oppressor's country, with the oppressor's religion fed to us and our children. That religion reinforced the twin doctrines of White supremacy and Black inferiority. As Blacks watch wave after wave of immigrant groups come to America and assimilate, we're gaslighted by being told that racism doesn't exist—that it's only in our head. Jews are worried about the worst that could happen, but Blacks are worried that what's already happening will never come to an end. For us, there is an urgency and an anger that may be difficult for anyone who's not Black to truly understand.

So what does all this mean? It means that there will be times when Blacks and Jews will have competing and conflicting interests. We will, at times, have different social, political, economic, and legal priorities. How do we strengthen and maintain our bonds of affection when that happens? How do we find the motivation to stay at the dance when we feel like running out the door? Consider this example: I'm an outspoken Zionist. But my heart broke when I saw public comments from another Zionist—Nikki Haley—denying that systemic racism against Blacks exists in America. As a Black person, denying the existence of pervasive and systemic racism is the moral equivalent of denying the reality of the Holocaust. So what am I to do, demand that Zionists disown Nikki Haley and refuse any support from her? I don't have the answers, but I know that collectively, we can find the answers. But we must be willing to have these difficult and uncomfortable conversations. When we have our wooden eye/big nose moments, we have to be willing to give each other the benefit of the doubt. To empathize with each other. To seek understanding before passing moral judgment. And above all, let's promise each other that whatever happens, we will never leave the dance.

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