

Black Nationalism, Jews, and Zionism

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The Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan, who has proclaimed that Hitler was a "great man" and, in the best anti-Semitic tradition, asserted that the Jews are a nation of exploiters and bloodsuckers, is a hero among many Blacks. The anti-Semitic slip by Black leader Jesse Jackson, who called New York "Hymietown" more than a decade ago, has not been forgotten. (Since he made the remark, Jackson has apologized many times.) There are repeated skirmishes between young Blacks and Jewish yeshiva students in Brooklyn and recent attacks in Harlem against Jewish storekeepers, further underscore Black anti-Semitism. Israel felt profound resentment when many African states broke off diplomatic relations around the time of the Yom Kippur War; African leaders were depicted as being allied with Israel's enemies. But do these events faithfully represent the historic relations between Black nationalism, the Jews, and Israel?

Despite the above events, a less known phenomenon is the great sympathy for Judaism and Zionism evinced by most leaders of Black nationalism of the past century, in America and Africa.

It all begins with the Book of Books. In their writings, the ideologues of Black nationalism emphasize that the Bible accords an honorable status to the Black nations — Ethiopia, Cush, and Egypt. (Black nationalists consider the last to be African and an example of the many accomplishments of Black culture in antiquity.) According to them, the Bible never mentions racial hierarchies or discrimination. Time and again they cite the verse, "Are you not as children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel?" (Amos 9:7). They also emphasize the frequency of interracial marriages — the great taboo of racists — in the Bible: Abraham and Hager, Joseph and Asenath, Moses and Zippora. They place particular emphasis on the Bible's enlightened attitude regarding slavery, citing the verse "You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with your master" (Deuteronomy 23:16), which established a legal principle contradictory to the Fugitive Slave Law of the mid-nineteenth century United States.

Many noted the link between the fathers of the Hebrew nation and African Egypt; some defined Judaism as a culture whose source was African-Egyptian. There are frequent references to the relationship between

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King Solomon and the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba, the assistance against Sennacherib extended to King Hezekiah of Judah by the Ethiopian King Tirhakah (Isaiah 37:9), and the trade between Judah and Ophir (sometimes identified with Sofala in eastern Africa).

Another bond between Blacks and Jews derives from the historical parallels between the Blacks' condition in America and the Jews' lot as slaves in Egypt and in the Babylonian exile. Servitude in America resembled Israelite slavery in Egypt. In Black literature, poetry, and spirituals, America is Egypt and Pharaoh's land, Africa is Zion and Jerusalem, and the Atlantic Ocean is the Jordan. Every Black leader who aroused hopes in the last two hundred years was a Black Moses; Blacks waited for the walls of Jericho — of slavery and racism — to come tumbling down. Black nationalist churches included "Zion" in their name; slave rebellions imitated the Israelites in Pharaoh's land.

Caseley Hayford of the Gold Coast, one of the first ideologues of nationalism in Africa, declared that just "like Israel of old, the Africans of our days will walk out of Egypt". The high priest of Black radicalism in America, Marcus Garvey, said that his people had been taken into slavery and exile "like the Jews in Egypt and Babylon". Edward Blyden wrote that the songs of "the Hebrew captives by the waters of Bablyon" and the songs of the Blacks "that float down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers" are "one in feeling and character".

Black writing is full of great esteem for the Jews. For a devout Christian like Blyden, the Jews are a "sacred nation", "God's chosen people", "a light unto the Gentiles", and an "eternal people" which was an "indispensable element in the spiritual and cultural regeneration of humanity". William E.B. DuBois, a Harvard Ph.D., admired the Jews' "racial pride", mutual solidarity, and capacity for survival. All spoke appreciatively of the Jews' economic ability (with no hint of the anti-Semitism sometimes intended in European remarks on this subject) and of the honorable place that Jews allot to education. In one of his recent speeches, Nelson Mandela, too, spoke about the "Jewish community which has won a great reputation, and rightly so, by virtue of the broad education and varied talents in professional fields, in commerce and industry".

Most important of all, Black thinkers saw the Jews as fellow sufferers, victims of discrimination and persecution. In 1957, when Moshe Dayan visited Ghana for its independence festivities, that country's leader, Kwame Nkrumah, took him on a tour of Christianborg Fortress, which had served as a way station for the slave trade. As they walked through the detention cells and torture chambers, Nkrumah remarked to Dayan: "We, too, have come a long way." That "too" reflects identification with the Jews. Nkrumah would not have used it when talking with high-ranking visitors from Britain,

the United States, or France. Again and again the ideologues of Black nationalism drew analogies between the lynching of Blacks in America and pogroms against Jews, between the slave trade and the Inquisition (and, after 1945, the Holocaust), between the slave plantations and the medieval Jewish ghetto. Nazi racism intensified identification with the Jews among an entire generation of Black leaders. Garvey unhesitatingly declared that "if Hitler hates the Jews, he also hates Blacks". DuBois wrote: "In their hearts the Negroes' feelings go out to the Jews. They know what Hitler means because they have known slave overseers, plantation riding bosses, high sheriffs, governors like Cole Blease who shouted, 'To hell with the Constitution when it interferes with lynching'."

In the wake of their similar histories of persecution and suffering, Blacks developed a unique solidarity with the Jews. Ras Makonnen of Guyana had a simple explanation for the enthusiasm with which the delegates of the All-African Peoples Congress received Israel's Foreign Minister Golda Meir when she visited the Ghanain capitol in 1958: "For us, it was a question of niggers and Jews". At the Fifth Pan-African Congress, held in Manchester in 1945, which sketched out the ideological path for the complete liberation of Africa from colonial rule, giant placards against colonial repression, white racism, and anti-Semitism appeared side by side. Many Black leaders recall with esteem and appreciation the aid extended to them by Jewish lawyers, intellectuals, and friends during the struggle against racism. Nelson Mandela has emphasized that a Jewish law firm was the only one willing to take him on as a clerk. He has also praised Izzy Maisels, the Jewish attorney who defended him vigorously in the 1964 Rivonia trial at which he was sentenced to life imprisonment for terrorist activity. Mandela also cites the exemplary support of many Jews for his struggle, and their membership in the leadership echelons of the African National Congress.

SYMPATHY TOWARD ZIONISM

The ideologues of Black nationalism had a warm and sympathetic attitude toward Zionism, too, which they saw as a paradigm for Black nationalism. As long ago as 1898, Blyden, in his book *On the Jewish Question*, wrote about that "marvellous movement called Zionism". DuBois told the Second Pan-African Congress (1919) that the "African movement means to us what the Zionist movement must mean to the Jews". Marcus Garvey, the father of Black Zionism, conducted his propaganda campaigns in the 1920s in the Black ghettos with the slogan, "Africa for the Africans, like Asia for the Asians and Palestine for the Jews". Like the fathers of Zionism, the founders of Black nationalism rejected the solution of cultural assimilation

and absorption into the majority. DuBois insisted that the Blacks, "like the Zionists, want to return to human dignity and equality". Both movements had a profound need to overcome stereotypes — of the Diaspora Jew on the one hand, and of the savage African on the other. Frantz Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, compared the psychological influence, internalization of prejudices, and the need to escape the negative self-image that the hostile and racist world had foisted on Jews and Blacks alike.

Black nationalist thinkers also dealt with Jews' rights in the Land of Israel. Blyden, the preacher who knew Hebrew and taught in Sierra Leone and Liberia (where he served as Foreign Minister), visited the Land of Israel in the early 1870s. In 1873, he published a book on his travels, *From West Africa to Palestine*, repeatedly asserting that the country is the homeland of the Jews. He includes an enthusiastic Zionist sermon that explains why the Jews should return to their historic country.

Of particular interest, in light of what has taken place in the Land of Israel between Jews and Arabs over the last hundred years, is Blyden's report of the "remarkable unanimity among the principal sects" — Jews, Christians, and Muslims — with regard to the final destiny of Jerusalem: it is to be the scene of latter-day glories and the Jews are to be restored to the land of their fathers. In his later book, *On the Jewish Question*, he again wrote that "there is hardly a man in the civilized world — Christian, Mohammedan or Jew — who does not recognize the claim and the right of the Jew to the Holy Land". In this book, written one year after the First Zionist Congress, Blyden describes Herzl as a new Moses who will bring the Children of Israel to the Land of Israel, where they will again become a "leading secular power".

DuBois' writings, too, are full of "Zionist" comments. On the day that Israel proclaimed its statehood, he wrote an emotional article in the *Chicago Star* about Israel's right to independence, and castigated the Arab invasion and American vacillation. In 1948, DuBois wrote about the Land of Israel as the historic homeland of the Jewish people, since "every child knows that ancient Jewish civilization and religion centered in Palestine". He viewed the establishment of a Jewish state after two thousand years of wandering and persecution as an act of historic justice to the Jews and a model of hope for the Blacks.

Nelson Mandela spoke in a similar vein in a speech in Johannesburg: "If Zionism means the right of the Jewish people to live in secure boundaries, to have their own state, and to live in a manner that affords them the right to fully express their culture, traditions, and religion, then we consider Zionism a healthy movement". He demonstrated his positive attitude toward Zionism again after he was elected president of South Africa, when he called on that country's Jews who had emigrated to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to come home. With regard to Jews who had gone to Israel, however, he

noted that he understood the special bond between them and the Jewish homeland and therefore did not include them in his call.

One cannot understand this fierce romance between Israel and Africa in the 1950s and the 1960s without understanding the love for Judaism and Zionism that was a legacy of all the ideologues of Black nationalism over the past century. The founding fathers of independent Africa were strongly influenced by the generation of thinkers who preceded them. For them Israel is the land of the Bible, the homeland of a persecuted people, the country of refugees from the Holocaust, and an example of the success of an oppressed and humiliated people in attaining the highroad of history. At the beginning of 1996, forty African states maintained diplomatic relations with Israel. □