

surface with greater immediacy and force that will to live which had been seething towards explosion long before. So Dubnow, among others, was right all along.

Jewish values need Jewish space

In the United States the Six Day War removed some of the pollution created by this community's manifold activities for Israel and for all good causes; its parlor game search for Jewish values; its promiscuous cohabitation in backstreet ecumenism. Jewish youth began to see, beyond Establishment jargonese, the enduring things that are taking shape in Israel. The search for Jewish values is global, but its focus, as in the past, is Israel/Judea. Alexandrian Jewry never pretended that its Temple, albeit more lavish, was a substitute for the Jerusalem Temple. It is true enough, at this time at least, that the Jew is free to exercise his Jewishness in America. However, each culture needs its own *lebensraum*. The American space is too crowded with the dominant culture, as was Alexandrian space. Hellenism also penetrated Jerusalem, but was vanquished there because it had intruded into Jewish space.

A people's culture is the sum total of its experience. In Israel, the density of its Jewish population and the historic landscape against which that population moves, have caused the surfacing of that total experience. Israeli poetry, written by secularists, is replete with Biblical associations as perhaps no other Hebrew poetry since the Fall of the Second Temple. The prose of Israel's writers blends Talmudic Hebrew and sabra slang and, translated into Hebrew, the idiom of Yiddish and of Arab-African Jewry. The sabra's first keen consciousness of the global ethnic common fate was brought on by the Eichmann trial. The American Jewish intellectual's conversion came at the same time, perhaps not as a direct consequence of the genocidal horrors recited at the trial but in self-defensive response to the dis-esteem he feared he might suffer from Hannah Arendt's report, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It is inconceivable, furthermore, that Israeli society, from Neturei Karta through Mapam, would tolerate, or a significant minority would request ecumenical marriages, simultaneously or successively officiated by a rabbi and a Christian minister! Indeed, it would be perverse in that landscape. Yet how lightly this Samaritan practice has been eased into American Jewish custom.

The Judean: Hellenist dialectic

A struggle, inside Israel, for Jewish values would see the kibbutz and its supporters, non-believers and the religious, representing the Judean tradition, aligned against the urban highrise apartment dwellers, including Orthodox *olim* from the United States, representing Sybaritic Hellenism. American Jewish youth has begun to survey Israel's moods and features as a possible alternative life-style, in America proper or through *aliyah*. Many now prefer it to their parents' dinners for ecumenism and cocktail receptions for good causes as the quintessence of American Judaism. The struggle for Jewish values, albeit universal, will be defined in the first instance by the State of Israel's spiritual needs and it is there that the issue will be joined and decided. The Judean is always tantalized by the world but knows how to resist it; while the Hellenist is ever ready to barter away all his Judean commitments. In this dialectic we are all entitled to act as assessors of events in Jerusalem, provided we do not labor under the conceit that Queens and Teaneck are the equal of Jerusalem, or conversely, dispose of our responsibilities by appointing Jerusalem as our surrogate. Hertzberg insinuates that Wurzbarger is guilty of the former. Hertzberg himself should not be guilty of the latter.

Israel: importing American Jewish racism

Henry Schwarzschild

The report in the *New York Times* some time ago of alleged discrimination by Israeli authorities against Black "Israelites" who are immigrants from the United States should occasion concern with the underlying human and social problem in our own country.

The Black Israelites, led by Ben Ami (Carter), are originally a Chicago-area group that went to Israel looking for a more just society for themselves, one in which they would not be subject to discrimination because of race *and* religion. This group is only one small part—and not a very characteristic one—of the Black Jewish community in the United States, which numbers in the thousands. Many of them are of Orthodox Jewish observance; most of them worship in small, often quite old, congregations of their own; some of their children attend Jewish day-schools and seminaries, and a few have privately

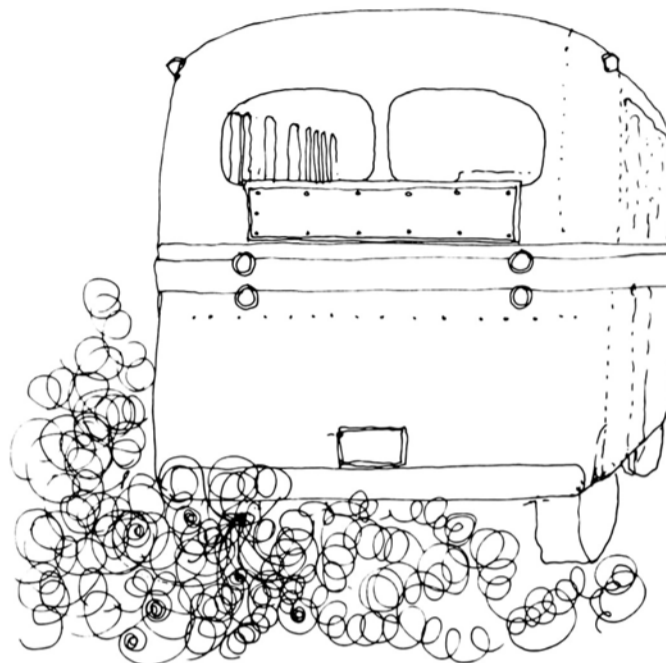
emigrated to Israel.

The relationship of American Black Jews with the general Jewish community has been tenuous at best. Jewish institutions have usually advanced the problematic “authenticity” or “legitimacy” of the Jewishness of these Black Jews as the reason for their reluctance to extend to Black Jews the recognition, services and brotherly inclusion in the life of the larger Jewish community that should be theirs. Many Black Jews are poor and great numbers of them need social services of every description, to say nothing of improved Jewish education and participation in Jewish community affairs. To my knowledge, only two Jewish community organizations (the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and the American Zionist Youth Council) have ever paid any heed, and both of them can be said to have done so in a niggardly and distrustful fashion (in marked contrast to small, local yeshivot and cheders, where the Orthodox community has evidently seen only Jewish students, not a “problem”).

The problem of authenticity

Some Black Jews may be of old African or Caribbean Jewish stock; some may be descendants of post-Civil War intermarriages; some may be converts or descendants of converts (indeed, one group of almost 60 Black Jews, residents of New Jersey, recently underwent a formal, Orthodox conversion in order to clarify and regularize their halachic status); others, finally, may be Jews primarily out of private faith, commitment, and observance, without any formal religious conversion ceremony or ancestry being provable. Concededly, together with the problems of “authenticity” goes a certain amount of religious and ritual syncretism in some of the Black Jewish groups. Some of that is historically explainable as a variant on marranism, some as due to the denial of acceptance by the Jewish community and the consequent lack of familiarity with Jewish customs. (The childhood memory of one Black Jew whose Caribbean family had been Jews for generations is of groups of Black Jewish adults and children—he himself among them—standing with nose pressed against the window of the venerable island synagogue during High Holy Days service. Blacks could not attend worship!) In any case, if theological or ritual purity were to be applied as a test of Jewish legitimacy, who would escape whipping?

But in a century in which the Jewish people have



Beware! noxious; unsafe; and it mixes races.

had millions of their own murdered, it behooves Jewish institutions to be more receptive to this freely given adherence to our historic religious community. The awareness of the presence in our midst of Jews with black skin color and “Afro” hair-styles may also just temper the hysterical, racist backlash that has become respectable among American Jews, from the JDL to *Commentary*.

Membership in the Jewish people has many risks and obligations but few tangible advantages; self-seeking motives for claiming to be a part of it are therefore quite unlikely. Color of skin is clearly a totally irrelevant element in the problem of the Jewish “authenticity” of Black Jews, both in Jewish law and in prudential social morality.

Implications for black jewish americans

The claim made by Ben Ami (Carter) that his group of Black “Israelites” are more truly indigenous to Israel than Jews from Europe has little to recommend it, other than the indirect reminder it provides that Moses (or the Baal Shem Tov, for that matter) was not a white Caucasian. Beyond that, the political and religious theories of Ben Ami are no doubt marginal to the Jewish communities of America and Israel, whether Black or “white.” In this country, there are two principal umbrella organ-

izations of Black Jewish groups that try to help their brethren: Hatzaad Harishon, which tends to view the priority needs as economic and educational, and Taharat Yisrael, which sees regularization of Jewish status (e.g., by conversion) as the road to the improvement of the life of Black Jews. Both groups need financial and institutional support.

It is a melancholy fact that the claims of the Black "Israelites" to full citizenship and social justice in Israel sound quite like the demands of their brethren in the United States. All the more reason for American Jews to show greater concern for the Black Jewish community here, a group of noble people who are doubly isolated—from the mainstream of our society by virtue of being Black and Jewish, and from the Jewish community by virtue of being Black.

CARL GERSHMAN is Executive Director of the Youth Committee for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East.

Our current debate on Israel and "Jewish values" in which a number of our contributing editors are participating, will be continued with a response by Walter Wurzburger. We would also like to urge our readers to enter into the discussion.
