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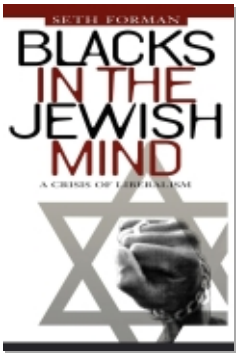
Conclusion: Blacks and Jews in American Popular Culture



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Conclusion

Blacks and Jews in American Popular Culture

"Yeah . . . I feel a part of me is black."

—Steven Spielberg

Arguing that it is in some ways more difficult to be a Jew in the United States than it is to be Black, as this book does, is in no way an attempt to minimize the very real impact of three hundred years of racial degradation or the continuing burden of contemporary racism. Nor is it to say that what American Jews as individuals, and sometimes as a group, have achieved under the freedom and opportunity they have enjoyed since the Second World War is in any way negligible. It is, rather, at its core, simply an attempt to demonstrate that Jewish life and culture have not been as easily adapted to American life as is commonly thought. In short, the tenets of American liberalism, around which so many Jews have organized their lives, have frequently diverged from the requisites of Jewish continuity, and this has been perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of American race relations. This book shows not only that American cultural and political institutions have been more responsive to Black communal needs than to Jewish ones but that American Jewish leaders and intellectuals have been, at times, preoccupied with matters of race due primarily to their belief, stemming from a unique past, that freedom from external bigotry is all that is necessary for a minority group to flourish in this great land.

Perhaps the turmoil in the Jewish community over the issue of government-sponsored school voucher programs best dramatizes the extent to which the priorities of liberalism as it pertains to the Black community continue, in the 1990s, to dictate Jewish communal policy. Major American Jewish organizations have long opposed the idea of giving parents government subsidized vouchers to send their school-age children to the public or private school of their choice. Ostensibly, such opposition has been grounded in the liberal belief that vouchers pose a threat to the separation of church and state. The opposition of major Jewish groups such as the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee to

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voucher programs has remained steadfast, despite great enthusiasm from orthodox Jewish groups and substantial evidence that such programs strengthen Jewish education efforts, particularly religious day schools. The 1990 Jewish Population Study indicates that one of the most common characteristics among strongly identifying Jews is a day school education, which immerses youngsters in Jewish knowledge and a Jewish lifestyle.

Nevertheless, not only do most Jewish leaders remain opposed to school vouchers, but the motivation of those who are now beginning to break through the liberal line on this issue reveals that Jewish leadership has been much more responsive to the sensibilities of the Black community than to a clear-cut concern with Jewish education or issues of church and state. Mainstream Black organizations have long opposed voucher programs on the grounds that they would deplete inner-city public schools of students and resources. But now that some prominent Black leaders such as Queens Representative Floyd Flake and the Wisconsin state legislator Polly Williams have broken ranks on this issue, redefining vouchers as a way to Black empowerment, some Jewish spokespersons are calling for a "real, serious reassessment" of vouchers by the Jewish community. At a day-long conference on "School Vouchers and the Jewish Community" held in Washington, D.C., in May 1997, Jewish leaders made no effort to hide the fact that their shift on this issue has everything to do with Black education and almost nothing to do with Jewish education. During the conference, Barry Schrage, the president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, said, "The issue of funding for Jewish day schools is less important than social justice." Larry Rubin, the executive director of the Jewish Council on Public Affairs (formerly the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council), said that, when pondering the efficacy of voucher programs, Jews must consider "the consequences of a failing educational system on the underclasses in an urban setting." As one Jewish sociologist has written about the position of Jewish leadership on the voucher issue, "When it comes to government aid that might possibly assist [Jewish] parochial schools, it seems that interests like Jewish continuity don't even make it on the radar screen."[1]

The problem for American Jews has not been their recognition that freedom from the burdens of bigotry is crucial to the success of minority groups or that the Black struggle in the United States to obtain this freedom has been perhaps the most worthy struggle of all, but rather their neglect of the other necessary ingredients for minority success: mainly, the maintenance of social and behavioral boundaries that separate the mi-

nority from the majority, boundaries that are now, as they always have been, for obvious reasons, far more difficult for Jews in the United States to draw than for Blacks. Moreover, Black culture, though born of exclusion, is largely American culture, whereas Jewish culture is largely, well, *Jewish* culture. Where Black Americans have historically needed only to respond to the weight of their history to affect American life and to stake their claim in it, Jews, it seems, have had to discard theirs before they could do the same. If Jewish life is going to continue among nonorthodox Jews in the United States, Jews will have to make concerted efforts to demarcate Jewish space from American space, a frequently difficult and unpleasant task.

In conclusion, perhaps a brief look at the wildly different, and commonly misunderstood, roles played by Black culture and Jewish culture in the popular arts of the United States will be instructive in bringing these points to light. In perhaps one of the most devastating cultural ironies, the Hollywood movie system, founded by Jews and commonly believed to be their greatest cultural gift to the United States, has proven to be the venue most strongly representative of Jewish assimilation. From the very beginning, Hollywood moguls like Louis B. Mayer, David O. Selznick, and Jack Warner were the ultimate Jewish assimilationists. "Hollywood Jews effaced their Judaism as a means of being accepted," writes the historian Neal Gabler. "There were a great many Jews [in Hollywood] who resented being branded outsiders, and they reacted against their Judaism aggressively."[2] With only a few notable exceptions, the Jewish image in Hollywood movies in recent decades has reflected the assimilationism of the Jewish moguls. In movies like *Radio Days* (1987), *The Adventures of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), *Avalon* (1990), *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *My Favorite Year* (1982), and *The Chosen* (1981), Jewish protagonists are shown fleeing from traditional Jewish fathers and Jewish cultural backwardness.[3] On the issue of intermarriage, a most recent concern, Hollywood carries on the tradition. In movies like *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), *White Palace* (1990), *Heartburn* (1986), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *The Way We Were* (1973), and *Prince of Tides* (1991), as well as such recent television shows as *Sisters, Chicago Hope, Murder One, Mad About You, Cybill, Partners, Bless This House, The Single Guy, The Larry Sanders Show, Friends, Love and War, Seinfeld,* and *Murphy Brown,* more Jews and non-Jews are getting together than are members of any other ethnic group combination, a situation that leads one historian to comment that "Hollywood's happy ending is one that joins the Jew and non-Jew in matrimony, or at least love, triumphing over the

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narrowness of particularism."[4] Apparently, the Hollywood moguls achieved their goal. In the minds of most Americans, any differences that exist between Jews and gentiles are by no means substantial enough to keep them out of wedlock.

The history of Blacks in Hollywood, as elsewhere in American life, is of a far different order. From the beginning, Blacks have been excluded from the Hollywood movie system. Whenever Blacks did make it into a film, it was usually in the form of one or another degrading Black stereotype. In the 1940s and the decades after, Hollywood produced a number of liberal-minded "message" films about Blacks, usually directed by whites and featuring such stars as Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, and Harry Belafonte. The 1970s saw the explosion of "Blaxploitation" films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), which attracted the first crossover audiences. Today, however, the recognition and appreciation by movie-going audiences of Black culture as interesting and authentic has resulted in a virtual flood of Black movies and television shows. Apparently, the history of exclusion has, as in so many other instances, left a Black cultural legacy now regarded as distinctly Black, yet, paradoxically, somehow distinctly American, too. Unlike the Jewish moguls and later Jewish personalities in Hollywood, a slew of talented Black directors, actors, and actresses has emerged who are ready and willing to make affirmatively Black films, and Hollywood studios have flung open their doors and laid down big bucks for their efforts. Twenty-three-year-old John Singleton received ten million dollars for his first feature film, *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) from Columbia Pictures. Singleton's subsequent efforts like *Higher Education* (1994) and *Rosewood* (1997) and other Black films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991), and *Malcolm X* (1992), nineteen-year-old Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991), *Posse* (1993), and *Panther* (1995), and Julia Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) are by no means assimilationist films. According to one critic, they are "stridently confrontational in their depiction of a problem-riddled urban culture in conflict with a white mainstream."[5] Very rarely is the subject of racial intermarriage ever viewed positively in these Black films, as it is in films involving Jewish characters, and the idea of racial intermarriage has made little headway in television as well, as the demise of shows like *The Robert Guillaume Show*, *True Colors*, and *Murphy's Law* demonstrates.[6] The fact that large portions of the audience and an overwhelming number of writers and producers for these movies and shows are Black mitigates against the view that racial intermarriage has not worked

in Hollywood simply because of white resistance to it. Here, what is often viewed by white liberals as a horrible racial injustice—limited choice in marriage partners—serves to strengthen Black cultural distinctiveness.

Compare also the two musical forms of jazz and the show music standard, two distinctly American art forms created almost exclusively by Blacks and Jews, respectively. As in the movie industry, Blacks had been excluded from the commercial development of jazz, in this case even despite having been its originators. As one historian recently wrote, "Almost without exception, popular-culture writing in the 1920s treated Negro primitivism as the raw material out of which whites fashioned jazz."[7] Some have seen the popularization of Black music as the consummate example of cultural theft. Amiri Baraka has written that "Jazz had rushed into the mainstream without so much as one Black face."[8] Later, there emerged a more accurate consensus among scholars that jazz was perhaps the most multicultural of artistic mediums, involving white, Southern folk, and Creole influences on an essentially Black urban idiom. However, the reracialization of American life since the 1960s has made race consciousness a powerful force in jazz. Just as the need to separate white from Black in popular culture once prevailed in music criticism, there is today a strong need to separate the Black from the white. Now, many critics talk about jazz as a singularly Black cultural idiom, and many record companies and concert halls give contracts almost exclusively to Black jazz musicians.[9]

And yet, perhaps appropriately, the association of jazz with Black culture is not paralleled by the association of the Broadway musical with Jewish culture, even though show music composition was dominated almost as completely in its origins by Jews as early jazz was by Blacks. Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Dorothy Joseph, Herbert Fields, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, and Arthur Schwartz were all of Jewish birth and by far the most important players in the creation of the Broadway standard. Perhaps Cole Porter, an Episcopalian, was the only major composer of popular standards not of Jewish birth, and even he confessed that his success was predicated upon his ability to write "Jewish tunes."[10] Here again, most of these Jews gained prominence after eschewing their Jewish backgrounds and making quintessentially "American" music. In fact, the show music made by Jewish composers combined the Viennese operetta and Black jazz to make what one critic called the "melting-pot music of the Jazz Age."[11] George Gershwin's music is more noticeably tied to the synagogue and its liturgical and cantorial melodies than the others, but even Gershwin, "the apotheosis of

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American musical genius," adopted the tone of the Jewish ghetto to *Porgy and Bess,* the opera of another minority group.[12] "Although Gershwin was not shy about emphasizing the material/historical content of his Jewishness when it was convenient," writes one historian, "his career relied upon the ability to sell Jewishness as a flexible modality—and one particularly suited for absorbing African American music." Apparently, Gershwin had considered working on an opera derived from S. Ansky's Yiddish folktale *The Dybbuk,* but he found that the "material was too far from what he knew best, which most commentators agreed was African American music."[13] Gershwin's involvement with *Porgy and Bess* was, according to another scholar, a case of "beginning Jewish and ending up Black!"[14] That the role of Jews in American popular music is emblematic of the phenomenon in which the "American" in American Jew emerges as the "Jew" recedes is exemplified by the case of Irving Berlin, the most successful composer of popular American music and an immigrant Jew who wrote "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade" and who married the daughter of an anti-Semitic Catholic and raised his children as Protestants.[15] Only, it seems, in the frenzied effort to become American does the Jew have an impact on American culture.

Perhaps the most tragic part of all this is that no matter how great the effort, it is unlikely that Jews can ever have the impact on American culture that Blacks do. During the embryonic stages of American popular music in the early part of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for music critics to interpret the "melting pot" music made by Jews like Berlin and Gershwin as "fake" and the ragtime or jazz music made by Black musicians like King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton as "authentic."[16] However the critical debate among art historians turns out, popular opinion has issued its own verdict. One music critic recently compared jazz music with the popular standard. "The two traditions, born out of poverty and exclusion (and talent), would cross and interweave, but eventually the one shaped by men like Duke Ellington would take precedence over the one shaped by men like Berlin. All our currently predominant pop styles—rock, rap, rhythm-and-blues—derive from Black music; 'Jewish' music lives on only in the bits and pieces of the tradition that a few of the better pop artists have absorbed."[17] Here, as elsewhere in the United States, it was much easier for the Jew to assimilate, but the fact that Blacks could not, and the fact that nobody now is being asked to, has left Black Americans in a much stronger position today.

All of this is certainly not to say that Jewish life in the United States is

without any redeeming value or hope. It is simply to say that corporate survival for Jews in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century will be more difficult to justify and sustain than it ever was before and that previously held intellectual orientations may not be appropriate for this new kind of challenge. Whether there is a bright Jewish future in the United States may depend on the speed with which Jewish cultural, religious, and intellectual leaders absorb this unpleasant truth.