Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America


Reviewed by Paul Grubach

Broken Alliance is an account of how the twentieth-century alliance between Jews and blacks in the United States came into being, and how it came to be broken. Concentrating on the period since the Second World War, the author describes the rise and fall of the black-Jewish coalition through biographies of three blacks and four Jews who were deeply involved in the civil-rights movement.

The author of Broken Alliance, Jonathan Kaufman, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Boston Globe. A Jew with Zionist sympathies, Kaufman owns to an early perception of alienation from Gentile society and culture: "I knew that, as Jews, my family and I would always be outsiders." (p. 2)

Though not a scholarly work, Broken Alliance provides the reader with a detailed, and for so widely available a book, unusually frank discussion of the past, present, and future of a minority coalition which has decisively influenced virtually everything to do with black-white relations in America over the past four decades.

Author Kaufman, drawing an alliterative shaft from Jesse Jackson's rhetorical quiver, writes that the history of black-Jewish relations went through three phases: "Cooperation," Confrontation," and "Competition and Conflict." Late in the book, he offers the reader a short synopsis of the factors which allegedly fostered the Jewish-black alliance:

- Blacks and Jews were brought together by intersecting agendas. Jews, emerging from the catastrophe of the Second World War, their recent past shaped by their experience of anti-Semitism in the United States and the legacy of Eastern European socialism, latched onto a political agenda which, they believed, would ensure their success in America: Society should not make distinctions based on race or religion. That was good for blacks -- but it was good for Jews, too.
- Blacks, readying in the 1950's for yet another assault on segregation, emboldened by the Supreme Court's decision in Brown vs. Board of Education
abolishing segregated schools, were willing to reach out and work with white allies. They accepted the help of Jews as people who could make a difference. There was genuine love and cooperation in the civil rights movement, but for some blacks and Jews, the main motivation was not an alliance but success. The alliance was a means to an end, not an end in itself. (p. 268)

Interestingly enough, the book fully vindicates claims which just a few years ago would have evoked the dread "anti-Semite" label. Broken Alliance shows that Jews were a ubiquitous and pervasive force within "black" organizations and the civil rights movement, often exercising significant authority over the black rank and file. "It was Jewish intellectuals, as well as lawyers and fund-raisers, who made the greatest contributions to the civil rights movement." (p. 108)

Several prominent Jews, including America's leading Reform rabbi, Stephen Wise, were among the founders of the NAACP in 1909. Joel Spingarn, an English professor at Columbia, became the NAACP's chairman in 1914 and served off and on in that role until his death in 1939. His brother, Arthur Spingarn, headed the NAACP's legal struggle; he drew upon the expertise of Jewish legal scholar Felix Frankfurter. The head of the American Jewish Committee, Louis Marshall, argued on behalf of the NAACP before the Supreme Court. Kaufman points out:

At a time when the cause of black rights was far from popular, Jewish givers gave tens of thousands of dollars to keep the NAACP on its feet. In 1930, the onset of the Depression threatened the NAACP's future. William Rosenwald, son of Julius Rosenwald, the founder of Sears, Roebuck, offered to donate $1,000 annually for three years if four others agreed to match the gift. Four did, three of them Jews -- Herbert Lehman and Felix Warburg, financiers, and Harold Guinzburg, head of the Viking Press -- and one non-Jew, Edsel Ford. (pp. 30-31)

In the summer of 1964, over half the white students heading south to engage in "civil rights" work were Jewish (p. 19). Kaufman adds:

Jews wrote most of the checks that bankrolled the fights of Martin Luther King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; and the Freedom Rides of James Farmer and CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality). Ever since the early years of the NAACP more than fifty years before, with a Jewish president and, a few years later, a black national organizer, leading Jews on the board of directors, and a vocal black membership, blacks and Jews were linked in the fight to end racial discrimination. (p. 19)

An examination of the top leadership of the civil rights organizations in the 1960's shows that where there was a black-white alliance for civil rights, it was often a black-
Jewish alliance. In addition to Jack Greenberg, director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, who is profiled in the book, Kaufman points out that:

[Martin Luther] King's top white adviser was Stanley Levison, a Jewish lawyer whom the FBI believed was a communist agent but whom King relied on to handle his finances, edit his books, and give counsel during some of the crucial crises facing the movement. The president of the NAACP and one of King's top contributors was Kivie Kaplan, a retired Boston businessman who--personally and through friends--gave hundreds of thousands of dollars, often after a hurried phone call from King or one of his lieutenants. Over at CORE, James Farmer's top fund-raiser and a key speech writer was Marvin Rich, later succeeded by another Jewish civil rights advocate, Alan Gartner. Jews made up more than half the white lawyers who went south to defend the civil rights protesters. They made up half to three-quarter of the contributors to civil rights organizations, even to the more radical organizations, like SNCC. (pp. 85-86)

Kaufman points out what he believes gave rise to the coalition: "Both [blacks and Jews] shared a common desire to break down the barriers of prejudice. Both shared a common enemy: the prejudiced white Gentile." (p. 268)

Ultimately, according to the author, the alliance broke up because the expectations and interests of blacks and Jews began to diverge and conflict. Every major Jewish organization, with various degrees of hostility, opposed affirmative action, whereas blacks supported it.

There have been disputes over foreign policy as well. Since the 1970's, some Black leaders have emerged as major critics of Israel and political Zionism. Blacks are unhappy with Israelis intimate relations with South Africa, and the tendency of American Jews to rationalize these. As one politically active, thirty-five-year-old black lawyer, Melanie Lomax, put it, many younger blacks "don't respect my parents' generation that was so much in the pocket of the Jewish community. Youger blacks are intent on breaking that stranglehold." (p. 280) Kaufman adds: "For blacks like Lomax, Jews have become the enemy, the obstacle they must overcome in fighting for political and professional success." (p. 280)

Despite Kaufman's careful documentation, which does not detract from his breezy style, one of his central theses, ie. what it was that gave rise to massive and enthusiastic Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement, appears flawed.

The author claims that three factors promoted Jewish devotion to creating a racially integrated society in America. According to Kaufman, "Jews had turned to black causes out of sympathy fueled by the radical politics of Eastern European immigrants, by their own experience with discrimination, and by the horror of the Holocaust." (p. 33)
Since Kaufman has demonstrated that the central Jewish role in the civil rights movement antedated the "Holocaust" by at least two decades, this factor may easily be subsumed in that of Jewish "experience with immigration." But even if the "Holocaust" is left to figure as an independent factor, Kaufman's tripartite explanation for Jewish behavior in America collapses when put to the test elsewhere: specifically, in Israel.

The Zionist state and nation which arose in 1948 might be said to have owed its existence to the "Holocaust," if that label be attached to the actual German policy of promoting immigration and then turning to expulsion of the Jews of Europe rather than to a fictitious extermination attempt. Modern Zionism, of course, is supposed to have derived much of its impetus from the recognition of leaders like Theodore Herzl that Jews could never hope to be free from discrimination and the threat of persecution in Gentile nations. Finally, among the Zionists who settled in Palestine before the war and flocked there afterwards, there were East European radicals aplenty, and "labor Zionists" of various socialist hues, including Marxists and sometimes even Marxist-Leninists on the far left, first established, then, until a little over a decade ago, governed Israel.[1]

By Kaufman's criteria, the Jews of Palestine should have championed the rights of the native Arab population. As Revisionists have long known, thanks in good part to courageous Jews such as Alfred Lilienthal, the Zionists did anything but that, and have rather intensified their mistreatment of the Palestinians to the extent that by now every sentient American is aware of it. Far from working for and integrated society in which Jews and Arabs functioned as social and political equals, the Jews who founded Israel created a society in which Israeli Jews dominate "israeli" Arabs, a separate and unequal society in which discrimination is part of the established social order.[2]

For example, ninety per cent of Israel's territory has been legally defined as land, which can be leased and cultivated only by Jews. Key institutions such as the kibbutz are reserved exclusively for Jews, as the Israeli scholar Uri Davis has recently reminded us in his thorough study, Israel: An Apartheid State.[3]

Were Jews around the world, and as Kaufman amply demonstrates, particularly in America, not such overbearing critics of national, racial, and religious exclusivity all this might seem like carping. But this stridency, coupled with the fact that the Zionist ideology is a product of more than visceral ethnocentrism, prompts one to wonder if what is sauce for the Gentile goose shouldn't be the same for the Jewish gander, and to ask, more pointedly, why the Zionists opted for national socialism in Israel while so many of their kinsmen were promoting international socialism from America to Russia.

The failure of *Broken Alliance* to offer credible grounds for the vital leadership and support Jews have lent the civil rights and integration struggle is disappointing. Unanswered and unrefuted, the claims of black nationalists, and recently of more than a few black assimilationists, that the Jewish role was prompted by a desire for Jewish
control, stemming originally from the commanding role of Jewish merchants and renters in black economic life, and prompted more recently by murkier motives linked to Jewish nationalism, will continue to work their mischief. Nor does this exhaust Broken Alliance’s failures of insight.

Kaufman never seriously addresses the possibility that active Jewish hostility toward Gentile society and values might have been a factor in taking the part of a group largely shunned by American whites at the start of this century. As Jewish political scientists Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter have shown, this seems to have been a motive for many Jewish civil rights activists. In the words of one of their informants:

... my activity in the civil rights movement was maybe less in terms of a genuine love, say, for black people at the time than with some kind of identification with white people who were disaffected from white society.[4]

The author’s openness about the effects of the encroachment of the urban black underclass on old Jewish neighborhoods is instructive not only for its frank sympathy for Jews, but by its contrast with Kaufman’s evident attitudes toward non-Jewish Whites in similar situations. As he points out:

In the wake of the urban shifts of the 1960’s, Jewish neighborhoods in city after city in the North became black. The shift was often accompanied by a rise in crime and a decline in the neighborhood, often the result of city governments cutting back police protection and other city services For a time in the 1960’s, there seemed to be no Jew who did not have a grandmother, a cousin, an elderly aunt, a family friend living in a once Jewish, now black ghetto, hemmed by crime and fear. (p 8)

Dealing with these traumas in microcosm, in his chapter on Jewish Chicagoans Bernie and Roz Ebstein, who moved to the suburbs after repeated incidents of black hostility, Kaufman writes of their "struggling over to stay or leave. It wasn't a question of racism." (p. 184) Yet his image of Gentile disinclination to be driven from their neighborhoods is provided by a lurid evocation of white resistance to Martin Luther King’s stagey march through Chicago’s Marquette Park in 1966, which Kaufman blows up into something approaching a combined pogrom, Nuremberg rally, and lynching bee (fatalities: 0; two were killed and fifty-six injured in a riot in a black Chicago neighborhood three weeks before). Surely there is no question that black Americans have suffered discrimination and oppression, and given that American blacks are citizens of a country which their ancestors have inhabited for centuries, the civil rights movement was often inspired by legitimate concerns. Kaufman’s heavy investment in universalism (outside Israel) blinds him, however, to the possibility that blacks may legitimately seek not merely self-determination -- "black control over black lives" -- but separatism, oviating the need for white and Jewish mentors to shepherd them to
integrated pastures. Likewise, he blinds himself to the possibility that America's white majority might have a legitimate interest in preserving its own identity.

Notes


2. Ian Lustick, Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1980).


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