

The Black-Jewish Alliance

Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*, Princeton University Press, 2006, 351 pp., \$29.95.

Why it arose and why it fell apart.

reviewed by Thomas Jackson

It is well known that Jews and Jewish organizations strongly supported blacks in their efforts to dismantle discriminatory laws and practices. It is equally well known that the black-Jewish coalition foundered in the 1960s. Cheryl Greenberg, professor of history at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, has used extensive access to the archives of many organizations to write a history of this relationship with an emphasis on trying to understand the motives, both for the alliance and its breakup. Like virtually all such studies, *Troubling the Waters* is aggressively liberal, nostalgic for the days when Jews and blacks marched shoulder to shoulder.

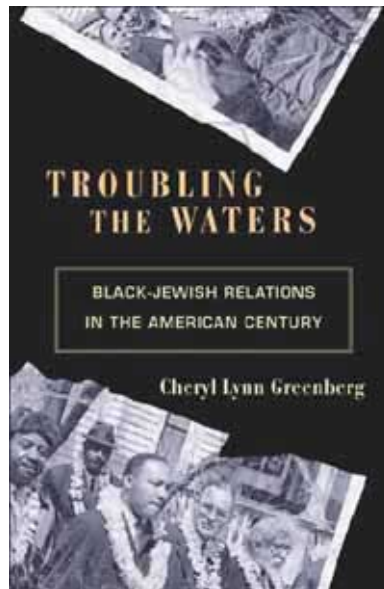
As Prof. Greenberg notes, there was no talk of a special relationship between blacks and Jews until the early decades of the 20th century. The small number of Jews living in the colonies and in the 19th-century United States had essentially no influence on public policy, and Jews in the antebellum South owned slaves at a slightly higher rate than gentiles. It was not until the arrival of some two million Jews during the waves of immigration that began in 1880 or so and the northern trek of large numbers of blacks during the Great Migration that the two groups began to discover common interests.

Blacks were outsiders, but many Jewish immigrants were, too. German Jews who had been in the United States longer, worried that newly-arrived Eastern European Jews gave them a bad name. In 1901, Rabbi Abram Isaacs described the established Jew's view of the newcomer: "ignorant, superstitious, bigoted hypocritical, cunning, ungrateful, quarrelsome, unclean, and in many other ways abominable." German Jews hoped for "more polish and less Polish."

Jews, like blacks, faced discrimination. Many restrictive covenants excluded Jews along with non-whites, some employers would not hire Jews,

and the Ivy League started restricting Jewish enrollment before the First World War.

Jews quickly established ethnic organizations. B'nai B'rith (Hebrew for 'Sons of the Covenant') had been in existence since 1843, and set up its activist wing, the Anti-Defamation League, in 1913. The National Council of Jewish Women was established in 1893, and



30 years later there were so many Jewish women's groups they needed an umbrella organization: the Conference Group of National Jewish Women's Organizations. Two of the most important Jewish groups were also established early in the century: the American Jew-

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ish Committee (1906) and the more activist American Jewish Congress (1916).

Why did these groups gradually ally themselves with blacks? Prof. Greenberg accepts the view that Jews were less inclined than gentiles to be "racist." Many of the new immigrants, she writes, "never felt fully comfortable with a white identity because they rejected the ideol-

ogy of racial superiority that usually accompanied an explicit self-definition of whiteness, because they resisted identifying with those who despised and persecuted them in Europe, and because many Jews continued to insist they were a people (even a race) apart."

Julius Rosenwald (1862 – 1932), part-owner of Sears Roebuck and a substantial donor to black causes, probably made the public case for the alliance as well as anyone: "Whether it is because I belong to a people who have known centuries of persecution, or whether it is because naturally I am inclined to sympathize with the oppressed, I have always felt keenly for the colored races."

Others traced the concern for blacks to Jewish morality and universalist values, but Prof. Greenberg points out that protecting blacks benefited Jews: "It allowed them to fight anti-Semitism by indirection; if racism could be eradicated, discrimination against Jews would also cease." When Jews claimed to be fighting for the liberation of all men, she writes, it was "a sincere, if partial, claim of universalism that masked self-interest." Martin Himmelfarb, who coined the expression "Jews earn like Episcopalians, and vote like Puerto Ricans," called it "that Jewish particularism which likes to regard itself as universalism." There was unquestionably a strong element of self-interest in Jewish advocacy of black causes, which became evident in the 1960s when black and Jewish interests diverged.

Whatever the motives, when the NAACP was founded in 1909, there was considerable—though not dominant—support from Jewish groups, and many of its earliest advisors were prominent Jews: Franz Boas, Felix Frankfurter, Jacob Schiff, Herbert Lehman, Julius Rosenwald. The National Urban League, the other major black organization that survives to this day, was founded one year later, also with some Jewish help.

Prof. Greenberg reports that it was the Jewish women's organizations that first adopted black causes, specifically demands for anti-lynching laws, voting rights, and abolition of the poll tax. However, cooperation was sporadic and restricted mainly to elite opinion. During

the Depression, in particular, activist organizations devoted their efforts to helping the many needy members of their own groups. Prof. Greenberg writes that it was Nazism that really drew blacks and Jews together and gave birth to the “golden years” of cooperation that followed the Second World War. Jews felt the need for allies more than ever, and found it effective to couch their interests in general, brotherhood-of-man terms.

Merchants and Miscreants

However, even if Jews were or wanted to be seen as the white group most helpful to blacks, they were also the symbol of white oppression. There were many Jewish merchants in black neighborhoods, and it was not always easy to square universalist claims with a reputation for sharp practice. In 1938, Jews owned seven of the nine largest department stores in Baltimore. All nine refused to hire or serve blacks, and Jews justified this by saying they were simply following white practice. That was undoubtedly true, but from sheer force of numbers, they gave a Jewish face to practices blacks resented.

In Harlem in 1941, Jews owned approximately half of the buildings and about the same proportion of businesses. That same year, both the ADL and the American Jewish Committee concluded that many complaints against Jewish shopkeepers, landlords, and pawnbrokers were justified. Behind frequent Jewish denunciations of “black anti-Semitism” was the uncomfortable reality that some Jews did mistreat blacks. As an important part of consolidating alliances, Jewish groups started pressuring Jewish businessmen to change their ways.

It was not always easy. In a 1943 meeting with an ADL pressure group, Harlem-based Jewish merchant Joseph Greif explained that “stuff not bought in my store is returned and they raise hell if I won’t accept it. They steal it in the next store and return it in my store.” Eli Lazar added: “A landlord in Harlem has to charge more rent because he can’t get

responsible tenants. They break the walls, etc.” One 38-year resident of Harlem argued that “the Negroes are a bad lot up here, stealing right and left. They have all the privileges they want—in fact too many.” Another businessman concluded that the only solution was to “get the hell out of Harlem. Leave Harlem to Harlem.”

In Chicago, blacks could patronize most white establishments but not work in them. A Jewish group tried to solve the problem from two directions by trying to persuade Jewish merchants to hire blacks but also by setting up what they called “a program to encourage the efficiency, punctuality, competency, and regularity of Negro workers on the job.” Likewise in Chicago, the Anti-Defamation League tried to get the city to set up an office to track black complaints, but went to considerable lengths to try to conceal its involvement. Prof. Greenberg notes that it was common for Jewish groups either to camouflage their actions or hide behind non-Jewish organizations to avoid giving the impression Jews and blacks were too closely aligned. Jews did not want gentiles to equate the two groups. In like manner, the American Jewish Committee’s Andhil Fineberg noted in 1939 that “if statements were to be made on behalf of Jews, . . . Christian names were better” because they “had no obvious self-interest.”

Despite efforts to win their trust, blacks persisted in disliking Jews. A 1949 survey in Baltimore found that 71 percent of blacks and 51 percent of white gentiles agreed that “in general Jews are dishonest in their business dealings.” Even after tireless efforts to reform Jewish merchants and to ensure blacks of their good will, Jews sometimes got only grudging thanks. A 1947 editorial in the black-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* conceded that “we are fully aware that many



More Polish than polish.

scheming, grasping Jewish people are drawing the life blood out of our communities,” but “we are compelled to conclude that the Jews are the best friends that the colored man in America has.”

Many black leaders, however, understood the importance of Jewish support and, whether from calculation or sincere belief, Martin Luther King, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Vernon Jordon, John Lewis, and others denounced anti-Semitism and promoted Jewish causes.

Bad relations between blacks and Jewish merchants persisted even during the “golden years.” After the 1967 race riots, a study by a prominent Jewish fund-raising and activist group called the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC) found that of the 36 black neighborhoods it studied, Jews owned at least 25 percent of the businesses. In four neighborhoods Jews owned 75 percent or more. By this time, most Jewish merchants were older people who had been unable to persuade their children to take over their businesses and were desperate to get out.

Wartime Alliances

War against the Nazis was a powerful psychological rallying point for blacks and Jews. Both groups could appeal to the conscience of the world in the face of Nazi atrocities, and blacks could turn to anyone who sympathized with European Jews and ask, “and what about us, right here in America?” As Prof. Greenberg notes, “The coincidence of self-interest provided the real momen-



Felix Frankfurter.

tum for collaboration.”

At the same time, although the alliance had mostly involved Jews helping blacks, the NAACP had become an ally worth having, with more than 1,000 chapters and 450,000 members. Still, even during the war years, Jews wondered about the political cost of cooperation when a 1943 poll found that 90 percent of white Americans said they would rather lose the war than give full equality to blacks.

The story of Samuel Klein and Ruth Seals was a typical balancing act. Klein was a Jewish executive for the Chicago Urban League who had a back secretary. In 1944, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) printed up pamphlets about these two prodigies with the title *He Practices Racial Tolerance*. No doubt with the 90 percent in mind, the pamphlet added that:

“Miss Seals, understanding the instinctive prejudices some of her co-workers might feel, . . . always managed to be in the locker room when the other girls were not there. She had no thought of joining them when they had lunch together . . . Miss Seals, keenly aware that she had not only to prove her own ability but able to stand as a credit to her race, responded to friendliness with friendliness, but never with even a hint of aggressiveness.”

At the same time, blacks and Jews had different activist styles. Many blacks threatened to withhold support for the war if they did not get concessions, whereas Jews had such an emotional stake in defeating Nazism they avoided the slightest hint of disloyalty.

After the war, Jews fought alongside blacks at every step. It was the NAACP that won the 1948 Supreme Court decision banning restrictive covenants, but Jewish groups had drafted countless briefs and motions. The AJC and the Rosenwald Fund paid for Kenneth Clark’s doll “studies” that so impressed the Supreme Court in the *Brown* decision, and the improper backdoor machinations in that case between Justice Felix Frankfurter and Philip Elman of the Justice Department have been documented in the *Harvard Law Review*. The AJC funded the “Studies in Prejudice” book series that tried to portray racial discrimination as a form of mental illness.

By the time Congress imposed non-discrimination on the entire country with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, black and Jewish groups had managed to get “fair

employment” laws in 20 states and 40 cities, and some of Prof. Greenberg’s most useful writing is her descriptions of the alliance’s local efforts. These took many forms. In 1947 there was an across-the-board campaign in State College, Pennsylvania, that involved count-



B'nai B'rith membership certificate.

less groups in countless discussions that led to lawsuits, individual persuasion, and newspaper ads. There were lengthy discussions of the merits and demerits of boycotts. The objective? To get white barbers to cut blacks’ hair.

Prof. Greenberg likewise describes the complex ordeal black and Jewish groups put the American Bowling Congress through in 1950 to make it accept black members, and how activists descended on Cicero, Illinois, in 1951 when whites rioted to keep blacks from moving into a white neighborhood. She tells us that the ADL contributed what it called “properly slanted books” to libraries and even offered a “potent message wrapped up as a jive tune” as a public service announcement to radio stations:

“You can get good milk from a brown-skinned cow;

“The color of the skin doesn’t matter nohow.

“Ho, ho, ho—haw, haw, haw,

“You can learn common sense at the groc’ry store.”

By the time of the major federal civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, however, Prof. Greenberg says the grand alliance was fraying. Sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, which took off in 1960, were civil disobedience of a kind that made Jews nervous. Southern Jews

wanted nothing to do with them, but brash northern Jews came South to take part.

At the same time, new, militant black organizations like CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) were booting out whites. Stokely Carmichael of SNCC paraded an exaggerated black consciousness, and spat on the idea of assimilation. Black power was the expression of a race-based identity, the very thing Jews thought they were fighting. Malcolm X called for armed Mau Mau-type uprisings in the United States, scaring many Jews.

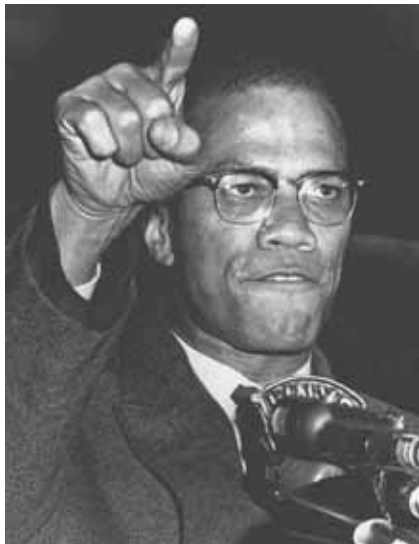
As the white empires in Africa collapsed, blacks began to see Israel as a colonial power, lording it over brown-skinned Palestinians. During an argument with Jewish supporters in 1966, a black CORE member said “Hitler made a mistake when he didn’t kill enough of you.” Not all black-Jewish relations degenerated to that point by any means, but by 1969 even *Time* magazine ran a cover story on the deteriorating alliance.

Prof. Greenberg writes that the death knell was affirmative action. When the *De Funis* and *Bakke* cases were decided in 1974 and 1975, black and Jewish groups were, for the first time, on opposite sides of the question, with blacks demanding racial preferences and Jews opposing them. Prof. Greenberg goes on to describe other famous spats—Jesse Jackson calling New York City “Hymietown” in 1984, the Crown Heights riots in 1991, Khalid Muhammad of the Nation of Islam blasting Jews in 1993—but as she ruefully recognizes, blacks and Jews no longer had the same interests.

By the end of the ’60s, Jews had everything they wanted. There faced no legal barriers and only a rapidly dissipating residue of private dislike. They were out-earning every other group and were vastly overrepresented in the American power structure. Blacks were still at the bottom, and had gone without a hiccup from demanding equal rights to insisting on special treatment. Jews, who had made it into college and the suburbs under their own steam, drew the line at equal outcomes. They now got nothing for backing black demands, so they stopped.

There is no mystery to that, but Prof. Greenberg invents one. She claims to believe Jewish success was due to “white

skin privilege,” and wants blacks and Jews to reunite to eliminate it. There is no chance of that. The neo-conservatives have many faults but they do not fall for rubbish about “white skin privilege,” and ordinary Jews are as sick of endless, futile uplift programs as ordinary gentiles. No one promises to gild the ghetto anymore, because everyone secretly realizes it cannot be done. Today, it would be



Malcolm X: A race-based identity was the very thing Jews thought they were fighting.

hard to think of two groups that have less in common than blacks and Jews, and the sooner Jews get over their liberal hangover the better.

Aside from the story of black-Jewish cooperation, there are several themes that stand out in this book. One is the sheer number of organizations Jews established to advance their interests. By

the time the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights was set up in 1951, it had 52 different cooperating agencies. Many were black but even more were Jewish. Armies of activists, writers, speakers, and lawyers could overwhelm the opposition through numbers and persistence.

Another theme is the appropriation of the word “democracy.” Over and over, blacks and Jews insisted that racial egalitarianism was inherent in “democracy,” a word absent from the Constitution and scorned by the Founders. In a country that had made war to make the world safe for it, however, “democracy” was apparently the ultimate weapon. In the 1950s, the American Jewish Congress promoted the perfect riposte if a right-thinking American overheard a stranger say rude things about minorities: “Say, fellow, that’s not very democratic of you.” As the Athenians would have pointed out, “democracy” is not incompatible with a limited franchise—or with restrictive covenants, for that matter.

Yet another theme is Prof. Greenberg’s disappointment with Southern Jews, who were loyal to Southern traditions and refused to act like Northern Jews. She writes that there was so much opposition from Southern Jews to school integration that the ADL delayed filing its amicus brief in *Brown* because of it. Even after *Brown* was decided, B’nai B’rith lodges in the South urged the ADL to withdraw its support for integration. Prof. Greenberg is embarrassed by this, and offers the explanation that Southern Jews were so fearful of gentile neighbors that they dared not criticize segregation. It seems not to have occurred to

her that Southern Jews had lived among blacks long enough to know very well what integration would bring.

The entire “civil rights” campaign by Jews and other whites assumed that people with no experience of blacks understood them better than people who had lived with them for generations. The manager of Cohen’s Hardware in Harlem must have felt like a Southern

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white man when slick ADL-types walked in and told him he could reform shoplifters by hiring them to work in the stockroom.

Books like this reflect the same self-righteous blindness. Prof. Greenberg takes it for granted that forcing whites to hire, live with, and go to school with blacks was a great achievement. Needless to say, whites clear out of “diverse” neighborhoods as soon as they can, and though they deal politely with blacks at work they go home to white surroundings, just as blacks go home to black. Racial differences and human nature continue to resist all the laws and brainwashing liberals can invent. Prof. Greenberg’s dreams of yet another grand alliance are dreams of yet more ways to boss us around. **Ω**

O Tempora, O Mores!

Disunited

Vinculo Hispano is a Hispanic uplift agency that caters to the burgeoning Hispanic population around Siler City, North Carolina. On April 1, 2006, it organized a pro-illegal immigration protest and encouraged local Hispanic schoolchildren to skip school to attend. Shortly thereafter the United Way, which helps fund the group, said it would reduce its annual contribution by \$27,000.

Dina Reynolds, a United Way spokesman, says it cut the grant partly because Vinculo Hispano went over its operating budget by 10 percent, but added that

United Way doesn’t like people telling children to skip school. Vinculo Hispano (*vinculo* means “tie” or “bond” in Span-



Strengthening those *vinculos*.

ish) says the cut is “racist and discriminatory,” and meant to intimidate. Director Ilana Dubester says the April 1 march was important to her people’s pride, and that the money helped recruit new members. Local Hispanic activist Nolo Martinez says Miss Reynolds is anti-Hispanic, and that he expects the United Way will restore the money when it meets in mid-July to review the decision. [Jose Cusicanqui, Guerra Politica Contra Organismo Hispano, QuePasaMedia.com, June 28, 2006.]

Nuevo England

New England prides itself on educa-