

## CHAPTER 7

# **A Member of the Club?**

## ***How Black Jews Negotiate Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism***

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### **A Strained Alliance**

This chapter uses a sociological lens to evaluate how American Black Jews, that is, individuals with one Black parent and one Jewish parent, negotiate the realities of Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism in their various communities. In particular I examine how their sense of belonging, that is, the extent to which their claims to both a Black and Jewish identity are accepted within their respective reference groups, impacts their responses to incidents of racism or anti-Semitism. The analysis is based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted between 1998 and 2001, following a period when tensions between Black and Jewish Americans had reached a boiling point.

Charges of rising Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism go back to at least the 1930s, when Black Harlemites first picketed Blumstein's Department Store for discriminatory hiring practices. Still, studies during the 1930s and 1940s concluded that prejudice toward Jews was less widespread among Blacks than it was among Whites.<sup>1</sup> Surveys conducted in 1964, 1981, and 1992 suggested a steady rise in Black anti-Semitism, yet the vast methodological differences among the surveys made it impossible to establish any trend with certainty.<sup>2</sup> In addition, survey results have yet to disentangle the degree to which anti-Semitism among Blacks reflects a distinct form of anti-Jewish feeling that does not conform to traditional Western anti-Semitism.

Recent data gathered in three American cities reveal that Black church-goers do not share in the vilification of Jews as Christ killers, and in fact have more favorable views of Jews than of other White Americans.<sup>3</sup> The fact that many Blacks identify with the story of the Jews' captivity in Egypt and their exodus into freedom has long been recognized by scholars such as Lawrence W. Levine.<sup>4</sup> Yet if the antipathy toward Jews among at least some Black Americans is not classic anti-Semitism, what is it and how widespread is it? Is there something unique about anti-Jewish sentiment among Blacks that sets it apart from the commonplace variety?

Many have claimed that negative Black attitudes toward Jews have emerged out of a particular set of economic relationships—as tenants of Jewish landlords, domestics in Jewish households, employees in Jewish businesses, or customers in Jewish stores.<sup>5</sup> This is partly true, but in the 1960s and 1970s much of the anti-Jewish rhetoric among Blacks coalesced around the Israeli–Arab conflict, the 1968 New York City Teacher's Strike, and the Andrew Young affair. It is clear that the media has had much influence in shaping public perceptions of Jews, Blacks, and their relationship, but by far the single most controversial moment of Black/Jewish conflict came in 1984, when in an off-the-record remark the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who was then running for president, referred to New York City as “Hymietown.”<sup>6</sup> While Jackson first denied having made the remark, he soon recanted and apologized, hoping to put the unfortunate blunder behind him. But the next month Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam catapulted the incident back to national attention when, in a radio broadcast, he compared himself to Adolph Hitler—while criticizing Jews for making the same comparison—and made veiled threats of retaliation toward Milton Coleman, the *Washington Post* reporter who broke the original Hymietown story.<sup>7</sup> By early April, New York City mayor Ed Koch, along with other prominent Jews, was calling for Jackson to distance himself from Farrakhan and his anti-Semitic invectives.<sup>8</sup>

In August 1991, City College of New York (CCNY) professor Leonard Jeffries delivered an address at the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival in which he unleashed his extremist and fantastical theories about rich Jews, the slave trade, and a “Jewish” conspiracy. In the end, Jeffries' vitriol did nothing more than spark a new media frenzy and heighten scrutiny of CCNY. During that same month, seven-year-old Gavin Cato was killed and his young cousin severely injured during a Hasidic motorcade under police escort through the predominantly West Indian and Hasidic community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Both were children of Guyanese immigrants. While witnesses differed

over what happened next, it seems that groups composed largely of Black Caribbean people—enraged by both the failure of the police to arrest the driver and the delayed response of medical workers—began a peaceful protest that soon escalated into a three-day riot and random attacks by youths on local Hasidic Jews, culminating in the tragic stabbing death of Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old Australian yeshiva student. The media characterized the riots as a Jewish pogrom, and Jews expressed outrage when false reports spread that Mayor Dinkins and Police Commissioner Lee P. Brown (both Black men) had initially withheld police protection from the Hasidim so that Blacks could “vent their rage.”<sup>9</sup> The city’s largest African American newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, ran the headline “Many Blacks, No Jews Arrested.” Little attention was given to the fact that the conflict was largely between West Indians and Hasidic Jews.

Two years later, in 1993, Wellesley history professor Tony Martin drew outcries from Jewish students for teaching from *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* (a notorious publication of the Nation of Islam) in his course on African American history. Later that year, Martin published his account of the campus controversy in a provocatively entitled paperback, *The Jewish Onslaught: Dispatches from the Wellesley Battlefield*.<sup>10</sup> Later the same year Nation of Islam spokesperson Khalid Abdul Muhammad made national headlines for denouncing Jews as “bloodsuckers of the Black nation” and the Pope as a “no-good cracker.” Although he was subsequently dismissed from the Nation of Islam, his vitriol landed him a public platform on NBC’s Donahue talk show.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, by the summer of 1993, when Cornel West published his book *Race Matters*, much of American society had declared itself color blind, and Jewish neo-cons were leading efforts to repeal affirmative action policies that had benefited Blacks in California, Michigan, and Washington.<sup>12</sup> The ability of Jews to wield economic and political power like other Whites in America further stoked Black resentment and helped pave the way for Farrakhan’s Holy Day of Atonement, Reconciliation and Responsibility, touted as the Million Man March, that took place in Washington, DC, on October 16, 1995.

Polls from the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and Harris were offered as evidence of a disquieting trend toward anti-Jewish thought, especially among African Americans, yet the data actually showed that the percentages of the most anti-Semitic among both Blacks and Whites had declined from levels recorded in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> While some surveys revealed elevated levels of anti-Jewish feelings among younger, more-educated African American respondents compared to their White counterparts, the variances likely reflected

the rising numbers of Caribbean immigrants. Furthermore, Anti-Defamation League surveys have repeatedly failed to distinguish between foreign-born and native-born Blacks, despite evidence of elevated anti-Semitism among new immigrant populations. Indeed, Gary Rubin later concluded from the 1992 Anti-Defamation League and Marttila and Kiley survey, "African Americans, like everyone else, became less prone to anti-Semitism as their incomes and education rise."<sup>14</sup> In addition, Anti-Defamation League surveys since 1992 may have tapped into rising Black resentment or envy of Jewish claims to White privilege, expressed as early as 1948 in James Baldwin's *Commentary* essay "The Harlem Ghetto."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Anti-Defamation League scale lumps both positive and negative feelings toward Jews into a single index. For example, subjects were typically asked to state the degree to which they agreed with the statement "Jews stick together more than other Americans." But a strong agreement with this statement may actually indicate an admiration for Jews rather than resentment toward them. Sociologist Lee Sigelman concluded, "[S]imultaneous acceptance of positive and negative images of Jews sounds a warning against any tendency to treat Blacks' views of Jews as an undifferentiated Gestalt," and draws attention to "a mixture of positive and negative attitudes more indicative of ambivalence than of anti-Semitism per se."<sup>16</sup>

### **Biracial Jews Weigh In**

The presence of both racism and anti-Semitism in the United States makes the process of opting for an identity even more challenging for biracial Black Jews. In the postwar United States, Ashkenazic cultural hegemony placed Yiddish culture and the Holocaust as cornerstones of postwar Jewish identity. Some scholars have gone so far as to define Yiddishkeit as Jewishness.<sup>17</sup> Embedded within the prevailing postwar Jewish identity, which emphasizes its European roots and defines itself more in opposition to being Christian than on religious observance, is the acceptance by most Americans that Jews of European descent are White. While gaining the privileges afforded to middle-class White America, they have fashioned a specifically Jewish form of White identity rooted in a unique blend of religious and secular institutions, history of survival in Gentile-dominated societies, as well as an often intense commitment to Israel.<sup>18</sup>

Scholars have used Du Bois' concept of double consciousness—whereby one looks at one's self through the eyes of the majority—as a metaphor for Jewish identity in America.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Jews have been

seen as both insiders and outsiders in American society.<sup>20</sup> While the notion of the Jew as the Other might have become a part of the legacy of American anti-Semitism, Jews were supplanted by Africans and their descendants as the quintessential Other in America. Still, a challenge of defining Jewishness arises because it is nearly impossible to distinguish between Jews as a people and Judaism as a faith. And while the diversity of American Jews in beliefs, practices, region, custom, and national background is often noted, Jewish racial diversity is seldom recognized. Yet previous sociological research does indicate that contemporary Jewishness in the United States is grounded in two principal ways. First, most Jews today regard being Jewish as including ethnic, cultural, and national dimensions.<sup>21</sup> Second, American Jewry defines itself in religious terms through the varied institutional frameworks and their rules of membership. While American Jews who identified as Reform and Conservative were evenly split by the 1990's, at 35 percent and 33 percent respectively, some 7 percent remained Orthodox and 26 percent held "none or other" religious identification.<sup>22</sup> Still, Jewishness in America can provide a basis for a stable identity while other bases of a group's social identity are in flux.<sup>23</sup> While scholars have explored the identity formation of biracial people with one Black and one White parent, few have examined those whose White parent is also Jewish.<sup>24</sup> The identities of Black Jews in general might well be understood as a wrestling with two forms of double consciousness, one created by the veil of blackness, the other through a Jewish Other.<sup>25</sup> Still, although Du Bois provides insights into the reciprocal nature of group boundaries and identity, the application of a strict Du Boisian model of double consciousness to understanding the self-conceptions of contemporary biracial Black Jews proves limited. Rather than defining themselves through the eyes of the majority, it was acceptance as the Other by "the Other" that our subjects often groped with. In fact many chose not to identify with either host society—Christians or Whites—but rather embraced two stigmatized social statuses, as Jews and Blacks.

I take an inductive comparative approach to establishing the boundaries of Jewish identity, beginning with the premise that there is no prototypical Jewish identity but only individuals situated, as Goldberg and Krausz write, "in positions contingently and perhaps contentiously identifiable as Jewish."<sup>26</sup> I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews to gather data on racial and ethnic identity, religious practice and affiliation, and experiences with Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism. Of my eleven biracial (Black-Jewish) participants, only two claim their Jewish identity through patrilineal descent. Consistent with other studies of Black-White biracial Jews constructed through snow-

ball samples, my sample is biased toward matrilineal-descent Jews.<sup>27</sup> Some scholars suggest that what is central to Jewishness is a sense of group history, as distinct from Judaism (religion), which is rooted in a set of law-defined practices.<sup>28</sup> In fact our interviews show that to be Jewish by halakhic law (i.e., through matrilineal descent) is distinct from assuming and affirming a Jewish identity through patrilineal descent. And in America, affirming one's Jewish identity for people who do not look White requires adjusting the public image that Jews are White.<sup>29</sup>

Interviews were conducted between 1998 and 2001, a period—as we have seen—of heightened tension between Blacks and Jews. Their voices bring to light some key differences in how biracial individuals with Black and Jewish heritage respond to racism and anti-Semitism on the ground, while reframing how we think about the forces shaping the identity options of American biracials. Those who had a weaker sense of place within the Black community expressed more heightened and visceral responses to anti-Jewish rhetoric from Blacks, while those whose Jewish credentials were regularly challenged by mainstream Jews were far more preoccupied with racism from Jews—which they framed, interestingly, by their own personal experiences and struggles for legitimacy.

With the exception of one Arab-descent Black Jew, subjects—regardless of their status along the continuum of Jewish belonging—adopted the language and framework of mainstream Judaism to discuss both Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism. Legalistic terms such as “halakha” (religious law) or “matrilineal and patrilineal descent” were central to discussions of legitimate claims to Judaism. When discussing anti-Jewish feelings among Blacks, many framed the discussion around the Jewish community's preoccupation with Farrakhan and other provocateurs (although subjects took great pains not to paint either community with broad strokes). Subjects who felt alienated or rebuffed from other Blacks expressed greater anger and outrage with Black anti-Semitism than did those who felt validated by other Blacks. In the end, it was not the strength of their sense of identity as Black or Jewish but their sense of belonging within the respective communities that shaped their interpretations of Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism. Secure status was correlated with greater objectivity.

Our first subject, Dana, a matrilineal-descent Jew and original member of the Alliance of Black Jews, was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, just around the block from Minister Farrakhan's home and the Nation of Islam headquarters.<sup>30</sup> She expressed frustration with the attention she often drew in Jewish circles: “You know, getting ques-

tions like, ‘Are you Jewish? Why are you here? How did you become Jewish? There’s a whole little like, every time you encounter Jewish people—White Jewish people they feel entitled to, you know, sort of ask about your Jewish identity if you’re darker.’ Having grown up Black in a poor neighborhood, Dana was also very conscious of the role that class played in defining her identity and sense of belonging within her Jewish community: “There were class issues that led to not belonging that I think trumped my emotional analysis of the racial issues that were going on in my congregation.... Oh, I’m sure they were there, but I was not feeling them the same way. I think they were buffered by these class issues.”

When directly questioned about incidents of racism among Jews, Dana gave an emotionally charged response:

It does not shock my Black self, it shocks my Jewish self, and it’s the only moment I bifurcate.... I get enraged as a Jew. And my Black self goes, ‘Oh, yeah of course. I’ve seen this before.’ It’s like the only moment I can trace where I do the split. But it’s more like the split ... when ... you’re watching White folks react to you and you’re watching you react to their reaction. I don’t know if you ever do this, but you sort of, you know that kind of Duboisian second sight thing.

Her views on the public attention to the Holocaust, which had reached a new high in the 1990s, reflected those voiced by many young African Americans of the period: “But, the Holocaust ... is a lot more complicated for me because a lot of other feelings sort of seep in about, why this holocaust, why only this holocaust? Why don’t we get to mark the other holocausts? And what does that mean about the way we value populations and communities.” She attributed Jews’ success in gaining recognition for the Holocaust to their whiteness:

The way that cultural memory has been instituted successfully by Jews is both one of our greatest achievements and one of our most serious moments of myopic blindness ... the way that Jewish whiteness has been able to enact this ... the fact that these kids who perished were White, you know, these women who died were White.... So, and it angers me every time I hear it. Every time I hear people being moved by Holocaust experiences. Every time I hear people going back and reading off a hundred names, there is a moment where my heart just goes shhhhhh.

In contrast to the indignation she expressed over incidents of racism among Jews, she offered a fairly analytical critique of Black anti-Semitism:

And this is what I don't understand about the way that Black anti-Jewishness is analyzed. It's analyzed as if it is separate and apart from broader anti-Jewish sentiment. And Black folks don't have the power to translate that and we don't have a history of translating that. It seems to me there are exceptional moments where, you know, you have conflagrations of anti-Jewish feeling, which, in New York, is largely immigrant based, not traditional African-American community based anyway, so there's that. But to me it's how it can become a catalyst for wider anti-Jewish sentiment. ... Looking at the dynamic interrelationship between the Nation's [Nation of Islam's] anti Jewishness and how it affirms, confirms, and legitimizes larger anti-Semitic sentiment in the United States. That's the danger. The danger isn't coming from the Black community.

Dana placed Farrakhan's anti-Jewish rhetoric within a broader political context of race in America:

I think there are lots of things that Farrakhan and the Nation [of Islam] are doing that are, you know, that are wonderful for our community in relationship to an increasing prison population which needs positive intervention, you know. ... I have problems with his gender politics. I have problems with his sexuality politics. ... I have problems with his heterosexism, I have problems with his African politics ... , and I have problems with his anti-Jewishness ... but I would not elevate my problems with Farrakhan's anti-Jewishness above the other problems I have with him. And it annoys me to no end that White Jews insist that we do ... particularly, because it affects the African American community, and I don't think his anti-Jewishness affects the Jewish community much, which is not to say that we shouldn't be upset by anti-Jewishness wherever it appears ... but ... I think Jews have much more serious problems.

Seymour is a matrilineal descent Black Jew who grew up in New York in the mixed neighborhood of Morningside Heights, near Columbia University. Seymour was visibly Black and recognized as such by both Whites and Blacks, making him privy to uncensored talk about Jews from non-Jewish friends and acquaintances in his cosmopolitan Upper West Side neighborhood. He was raised not unlike other Manhattan Jews. Between the ages of nine and fourteen he attended the left-Zionist Hashomer Hatsa'ir youth camp in the Bronx. Seymour attended Hebrew school downtown at a Reconstructionist Synagogue on 86th Street and was bar mitzvahed there as well. At the same time, he had grown an Afro and become involved in Harlem's graffiti subculture. He seemed secure in his dual identities as Black and Jewish, and was at home in either community.

As we spoke at his midtown Manhattan office more than thirty years later, Seymour explained how he had negotiated his allegiances to both



groups. He was skilled at contextualizing the debate, providing a calm and rational perspective to the conflict. At the same time, he did not hesitate to defend his Black brothers to fellow Jews or to make his Jewishness known to Blacks who expressed anti-Jewish sentiment:

Being thrown between Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism colliding on the streets of the city during the sixties wasn't pleasant. ... I read a really, really good book, about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, you may know about it, *Vessels of Evil*, Lawrence Thomas, and it sort of reminds me of just that, "who suffered the most?" There was that clear, you know, 'Look, this is not your time it's my time.' ... I would sort of defend my Black brothers from any sort of attack that might be based purely on the color of their skin, or the way they chose to wear afros, or the way that they chose to dress a certain way. ... And to Jews in the face of Blacks who would be anti-Semitic, you know, my perspective was that, "Do you like me? I'm Jewish, so what do you really know?"

Still, looking Black often trumped looking Jewish, even in Israel: "They [Israelis] saw me to a large degree as either Sephardic, Ethiopian or Falashan, or some of them would call me "Cushi" which I didn't take too well. Because I'd rather be called a Falashan, you know, than a Cushi." Today Seymour, an observant Conservative Jew, is married to an American Jew of European descent, and is active in the New York Jewish community.

Pnina, born to a Jewish mother and an African father, grew up in Los Angeles. She was raised there by her grandmother and a large extended family. Her parents sent her away to Catholic boarding school (an odd choice, given her family's embrace of Judaism) to escape a household in turmoil. Although she was visibly Black, Pnina had not been exposed much to Black American culture and was often rejected by other Black children at Catholic school: "The Black kids didn't accept me because I wasn't Black. That was in the days of, you know, Stokely and H. Rap. And, you know, you had to only listen to Motown. I didn't know how to dance!"

She was now in her forties and married to a foreign-born Sephardic Jew. They maintain a Jewish household and participate in Jewish community life. Throughout our discussion, Pnina made very few comments on Jewish racism but had a highly intense and visceral reaction to Black anti-Semitism and to Farrakhan in particular:

I think he is a master manipulator. I think he's a charlatan. I think he is a murderer. ... When we, when we were in Chicago and we were having this little conference, Gabriele said, "Oh let's go look at Farrakhan's house." So we drove around. And I have to tell you, I have been to Sach-

senhausen, I have been to Dachau, I have been to Bergen-Belsen. I have been to horrible places. I have been to, you know, prisoner of war camps during the Iraq/Iran War. ... I have dealt with evil, right? And I felt as I was driving around his house at night the way I felt when I was driving around Evin Prison in Tehran. That there is an open hole in the earth boiling with gas and sulfur and it's in his living room. And the evil in the core of the earth is just bubbling up.

Pnina's remarks contrast sharply with the more tempered assessment of our next subject, Rebecca, who was also a matrilineal Jew but who grew up with strong Black and Jewish identities. Rebecca viewed Farrakhan as more of a media hound than an anti-Semite: "Look, if I was in the media and trying to get attention I would attack the Jews faster than anybody. I mean if you're trying to get attention you know what to do. And, you know, Farrakhan was nowhere in the Jewish press until the Jesse Jackson thing and he stepped in front of Jesse and said, 'If you're going to attack Jesse you're going to have to deal with me,' and then kind of attacked the Jews to, I think, to divert attention and get attention for himself."

Josh was a very light-skinned Black born to a White Jewish mother and an African American father. They had divorced when he was very young, and he was raised by his mother and Jewish stepfather in a secular yet culturally Jewish household on the North Shore of Long Island. He had weak ties to both the Black and Jewish communities—but for very different reasons. While he was fully accepted within the Jewish community, the acceptance he sought—and which seemed to elude him—was from other Blacks. His tenuous status among Blacks sometimes led him to overcompensate, even passing as a non-Jew in the presence of other Blacks: "Often kind of, I mean, I'm not as proud of my Judaism. ... A lot of times, especially if I'm among, you know ... Black groups, I just don't say anything about it. I figure that it's something I'm happier to have go unnoticed. ... In a weird way, it's probably similar to the whole idea of passing ... it's just easier." He described his feelings of inadequacy during college, when Professor Leonard Jeffries had been invited to the campus to speak:

They certainly had a whole bunch of, you know, nationalists in that group. You know, there were a couple of Nation of Islam members that didn't really welcome me. ... And my whole kind of thinking then was trying to figure out who I am. I didn't really want to associate with the Jewish community very much. You know, couldn't really join their protesting in front of Jeffries, even though I kind of sympathized with their protests. I just didn't want to be a part of it, I guess, in my own personal insecurities in both communities. Not so like I was vocal enough in ei-

ther one of them kind of, you know, and not feeling entitled to kind of claim membership firmly enough in either of them.

When speaking about Farrakhan, Josh expressed shame, disappointment, and anger: “He doesn’t raise in me the anger and rage that he [does] in ... the majority of Jews. He actually raises in me ... just more shame and disappointment. I guess I’m pissed off at him. You know, it’s like, ‘Lou you make it harder for me.’” His frustration extended to the Million Man March, which he saw as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity he had been robbed of: “I did think of the Million Man March. ... And again, because I would have wanted to if it wasn’t Farrakhan. ... It’s kind of a once in a generation kind of thing. But I couldn’t really associate myself with him. I wouldn’t have had any self-respect. And again, that’s part of the disappointment, you know, you deprived me of my chance to actually be part of something that I’m entitled to partly because you’re embarrassing.”

Michael, a New York-born Jew with an Ashkenazic mother and West Indian father, was a journalist for a leading news outlet. Although he felt welcomed in both communities, he had a stronger Black identity. When we spoke in his office in June 1999, he gave his own analysis of Farrakhan’s effect on his identity: “It’s only Black people that are responsible for every other Black person. I mean but in our situation, you know, that’s the only place where people want to know what an entertainer is doing to repudiate a politician. ... He’s speaking for himself or his group, but no one goes to Jerry Seinfeld and says well you you’re going to repudiate whoever. It’s just not an issue.”

When our conversation turned to the Million Man March, he echoed the sentiments of Josh, noting that while the event “turned out nice,” he—along with some of his non-Jewish Black friends—could not give support to someone so “wrong-headed.” He also expressed disappointment that Farrakhan had failed to capitalize on the political momentum he had built. “And the interesting thing was really how little has ... really come out of it. I mean, anyone else who put together, whatever it was—six-hundred-thousand—anyone else who had done that there would have been more to come out of it in terms of real goals, within that community.”

Hannah, another matrilineal Jew, was born in New York City and grew up on the Upper West Side, near Columbia University. Her maternal grandmother had emigrated from Russia, and her mother had grown up in Manhattan. Her father came from a family of Black Episcopalians. Her parents had divorced when she was young, although her father still lived in their apartment building. While Hannah’s family

never attended synagogue when she was growing up, her mother was adamant about instilling in her a strong sense of who she was. “She always was like, ‘You’re a Jew, you know, this is what we do.’ But it was very home based ... they always had Passover. They always had Yom Kippur. They always celebrated Rosh Hashana. They always lit, you know, the candles though they didn’t have Sabbath every weekend.”

Her father had a more aggressive style of cultural indoctrination. Afraid she would grow up without a strong Black identity, he would “push stuff on me,” which had the effect of pushing her away from it. The family was well-off by New York standards, and Hannah had attended a progressive private school in Manhattan and went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in art from Yale University. Now in her mid-twenties, Hannah expressed curiosity about Judaism but was somewhat reluctant to pursue it in concrete ways or become involved in organized Judaism. She was drawn more to the mysticism of Judaism and found the Kabbalah fascinating.

Hannah lamented the broken alliance between Jews and Blacks and attributed much of the damage to Farrakhan:

Yeah, I remember when I was younger. When he said all that stuff. And I was really angry and really upset. ... I’m very liberal. ... I feel like people should be allowed to feel what they feel. If he feels that way about Jews he’s welcome to it. I think he’s wrong, you know. I think he should educate himself about the reality of Jews and the reality of the history of Jews and Blacks. Which is there’s always been a strong alliance. I’m angry that he said things because I think he was instrumental in making the situation between Jews and Blacks worse. When Jews and Blacks really had had a history together. You know, the Civil Rights Movement was Jews and Blacks working together. And I think, I think at that time yeah, Blacks needed the Jews’ whiteness but I think the Jews because of their history needed to help Blacks in order to help themselves as well.

Jonathan and his brother Andrew are patrilineal Jews who grew up in the Philadelphia suburb of Mount Airy—a “refuge for aging hippies, and folkies and civil rights workers.” Their Black mother held a master’s degree in art and had studied in Israel for a year because, according to Jonathan, she was “attracted to the culture and the religion. ... I know that her closest friends have been consistently Jewish. Her best friend now is Jewish. And she takes great pride that her sons are Jewish, although I’m not sure really what that means to her.” Their father was an atheist—a “Jewish-influenced secular humanist” who had been raised in an upper-middle-class household. Their grandfather had come from Galizia, an area between Hungary and Poland, the grand-

mother “from an old established German-Jewish Philadelphia family, which included artists and printers.”

Despite attending a Unitarian nursery school, having a Christmas tree during the winter holidays, and growing up with an atheist father, Jonathan had developed a strong spiritual connection to his Jewish roots by the time he had reached adolescence:

I guess I always had a Jewish consciousness which was strange. I mean I could tell you one strange story. And I'm not really ... I'm religious but I don't believe in formal religion as much as I'm attached to Judaism on a tribal level in terms of organizing. ... It organizes my week, my schedule. Which is not inconsistent with Judaism as a legal code. ... But I did always have this kind of feeling of faith and of connection. And then when I was 12, I realized that I wanted to express that in real knowledge about Judaism. So I learned it.

As a biracial Jew growing up in suburban Mount Airy, Jonathan had felt disconnected from the Black world, an experience he described as jarring: “I had grown up in a fairly rough school but I didn't realize it. I didn't realize how much every day there was a threat of basically getting my ass kicked. And I always talked my way out of it. I never got beat up. But when I went to the all-Jewish day school I kind of like had post-traumatic, like I became very, very fearful of, of going outside. And I became very, very fearful of Black people.”

While his sense of Black belonging evolved as he grew older, he also continued to develop a strong Jewish identity, which was grounded more in spirituality than in community. In fact as a patrilineal-descent Jew, he often felt rejected from mainstream Judaism. The events leading up to Jonathan's bar mitzvah had been particularly painful and alienating: “The rabbi said, ‘In order to have a bar mitzvah you have to convert.’ I was like, ‘Convert to what?’ I mean because you couldn't have told me that I was not Jewish. ... And even now, I met with some Orthodox rabbis that wanted me to reconvert to make sure my conversion's good. ... Because the rabbis that converted, one of them was not observant of the Sabbath which technically nullifies the conversion. But, you know, my feeling is the rabbis can really kiss my ass.”

Still, these difficult experiences in fact left him defiantly, triumphantly Jewish: “You don't have to count me for your minyan. You can bury me with Goyim, as if the rabbis can separate dust, you know. You can exclude me however you want. I know what I am. Actually one of the real comforting things I've ever heard anyone say was this, the rabbi in New York, in Utica, or in Brooklyn. ‘The Pope can decide who's Catholic or not, but he can't decide who's Christian.’”

Jonathan's failure to become fully recognized as a Jew may have led him to emphasize the spiritual over the legalistic interpretation of the boundaries of the Jewish community: "I believe in Halacha [*sic*]. I do believe. It's like citizenship. You know, you have to have rules. But I'm not a legalist. I believe in the spirit which is one of the reasons I'm attracted to Hasidism. It's because I believe in the letter of the law is important but without the spiritual interpretation it's nothing. It's empty. And I refuse to submit to that kind of legal, I mean for me it was always legal, it was always legalism. My conversion was always legal, legalistic. Like I'm already Jewish."

Jonathan believed that Judaism's emphasis on distinctions led to racial exclusion: "The problem with Judaism is that ... it's a religion of purity. And it's a problem. I mean, Judaism is a religion of distinctions between the week and the Sabbath, between culture and trade, Jew and non-Jew. And so when you have ethnic nuances or cultural nuances it's sometimes hard for people to reconcile. The fact is though, the Jews have been, have always been a diverse people, nationally, culturally, ethnically, racially. ... And in fact you can even say that Judaism is the perfect balance between a continuous culture and a diverse population."

Dark skin often signifies outsider status in America, and many Jews reinforce a normative Black/White binary in which Jews are defined as White and Blacks are defined in opposition, that is, as not Jewish. Katya Gibel Azoulay has observed that the union of Black and Jewish identities has been neglected and negated largely due to conflating Jewishness with whiteness.<sup>31</sup> And, as Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz has noted in her *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Racial Diasporism*, this binary frame makes it nearly impossible to imagine Black Jews as real social beings.<sup>32</sup> Thus one's claims to Jewish identity and community membership can be challenged in both secular and religious settings simply for not looking Jewish.

Jonathan's responses make a striking contrast to those of his brother Andrew—two years his senior—and underscore the key finding of this analysis: that the ways in which biracial Jews interpret Jewish racism and Black anti-Semitism are determined by their perceived status (that is, the strength of their sense of belonging) within the Jewish or Black communities.

Andrew was a staunch defender of Jewish legalism and believed that it placed Judaism outside the boundaries of racism. In fact, despite the fact that he was an agnostic, he held the Orthodox community in high esteem:

One of the interesting things of the Orthodox Jewish community is that they actually have clear rules which determine who is Jewish and who

is not, which takes race out of it. ... I mean, to be honest it is not a community that I could be part of but on the other hand they are as close to race blind as you can find in the Jewish community, so it is easy to kind of, you know, they do have a lot of irrational beliefs, you know, whatever, but, um, if you are looking for a community where nobody is going to say I am not Black, or nobody is going to question your Jewishness, it is about the only community I can think of.

While he described himself as multicultural, his responses to Black anti-Semitism and his comments on Jewish racism reflected his stronger links to the Jewish community. "There is a history of, there are a lot of Jewish communities where people will embrace you because people don't like the racism. In America, they see a parallel between anti-Semitism and racism, and to be very supportive. If I am honest about my Jewish experience I don't feel that welcome in a number of African American circles, I don't feel like a full member." His divisions were even sharper when contrasting life in the States and Israel: "In African American circles, there is a lot of, real anti-Semitism, a feeling like, you know the Jews are this, there are certain things like we aren't in the same boat," while in Israel, "I mean there are different traditions, but um, yet Israel is a place where being brown, I mean people are brown. The de facto color is brown."

Nadine, a twenty-year-old dark-skinned college student born to an Arab Jewish mother and African-American father, was raised on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Nadine was aware that people consider her authentically Jewish, but, with no Jewish identity or cultural grounding, she was largely oblivious to the debates on Black-Jewish relations and, as a result, contributed little insight for this forum.

In contrast, Olga, a 27-year-old matrilineal Jew who also grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in a secular environment, had found herself developing a Jewish identity in high school after the family relocated to Beverly Hills. She explained how dealing with race and fitting in as a teenager was different in California. She explained, "I think I felt a little, slightly stigmatized by my father being Black. I really, really loved my mom and wanted to, you know, wanted to be like my mom and I wanted to be like my, you know, my friends at school who had houses and, you know, parents [who] drove Mercedes and it turned out they were White and they were Jewish and I wanted that ... There was something I felt comfortable around ... I don't know if they physically were able to identify that I was Black, or I mean that I had something in me other than Black. I don't know if they saw me as the dark-skinned Jewish person, but once they found out I was Jewish it was, like, I was in." Until college, she identified as White and Jewish, which she saw as the markers of success. Then she began to deal with

her issues around race and develop a wholly integrated self, arriving at “an equilibrium,” as she put it, – proud and secure in her blackness and Jewishness. When I asked her how she felt about Farrakhan she explained her mixed feelings, “When things like that actually come out of Louis Farrakhan’s mouth, that’s unacceptable, for anyone’s mouth. Any form of prejudice or hatred is unacceptable! But ... being someone who is in both those communities, the Black community and the Jewish community, you know, every side accuses the other side of, you know, of not really listening and of ... hating the other. And, and stereotyping, and scapegoating and all that stuff. And I try not to do that. I mean, I’m a human being, we’re all human beings, ... it’s hard to be immune to society’s racism, you know, we all are socialized in America and so it’s hard. We learn racism, we can unlearn it and we’re responsible to, responsible for that, each and every one of us. Not everyone takes that on. I take it on.”

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced a paradigm to explain the nature and intensity of responses articulated by biracial Jews on Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism. Scholars have relied on survey research to emphasize how biracial individuals choose their identities. However, interviews reveal that identity is not simply a matter of choosing, but requires a reciprocal relationship with the reference group of choice.<sup>33</sup> The extent to which their claims to a Black and Jewish identity were accepted within their respective reference groups shaped how the interviewees personally experienced and responded to incidents of Black anti-Semitism or Jewish racism. Strong status within either community was correlated with more neutral, open stances, while weaker links to the community correlated with more emotionally charged responses. The data also revealed that possessing a religious, cultural, or racial identity is not synonymous with feelings of group belonging. Dana, who had both strong Black and Jewish identities, sometimes felt like an outsider among Jews. Her remarks about Black anti-Semitism were considerably more guarded and measured than her remarks on Jewish racism. Seymour, who also had strong identities as both a Black and a Jew, felt secure in both communities and took a more detached stance when analyzing tensions between Blacks and Jews.

Pnina, who had felt rebuffed by other Blacks as a child, had a stronger sense of Jewish identity and belonging. Her comments on Black anti-Semitism, and on Farrakhan in particular, were highly charged



and personalized. Rebecca, on the other hand, expressed strong ties to both communities and offered a more tempered, objective assessment of Farrakhan. Josh had a weak sense of identity as both a Black and a Jew and felt marginalized within both communities. While his status as a Jew was secure and unchallenged, the acceptance he sought was from Blacks. Like Dina, he had a more emotive response to questions on Black anti-Semitism.

While Michael had a strong Black identity and weak Jewish identity, he still had been brought up in a more culturally Jewish environment and felt a strong sense of belonging to both communities. When asked about Farrakhan, he questioned why Blacks were made to feel responsible for the actions and words of another Black person. Hannah, on the other hand, had a strong sense of her Judaism, yet had weak ties to a Jewish community, although this seemed to be more a matter of personal choice than of rejection by other Jews. Her Black identity was somewhat weaker than others and she had indeed experienced rejection from other Blacks when she was growing up. Her comments on Farrakhan were more emotional and personalized than those of Michael.

Finally, brothers Jonathan and Andrew, both patrilineal-descent biracial Jews, had distinct views on Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism. These views were shaped by their own expectations, experiences, and needs within the Jewish community. Jonathan had a strong spiritual identity as a Jew, but his claims to Jewish membership had been rejected by many religious Jews. He in turn rejected the requirements of Jewish religious law, but never his Jewish soul. His Black identity had evolved since childhood. He now felt fairly secure in his belonging, and his comments on Black anti-Semitism can be described as analytical. His brother Andrew, on the other hand, who had both a strong cultural Jewish identity and sense of belonging as a Jew, was defensive of Jewish legalism and embraced a strict definition of who was a Jew. He had a weak Black identity and no strong ties to the Black community. Predictably, he characterized Black anti-Semitism as much more intense and problematic than Jewish racism.

In sum, scholars have often treated identity choices as synonymous with group membership, yet our data reveal that distinct processes are at work in shaping both identity and one's response to anti-Semitism and racism. While today identity for White Americans may be what sociologist Mary Waters calls a simple matter of choosing options, group membership for biracial individuals entails both making claims and having those claims legitimated by the group.<sup>34</sup> The individual may indeed choose but might not necessarily be chosen in return. Acceptance

is critical to belonging, and the sense of belonging is critical to the framework through which individuals experience, perceive, and evaluate the rhetoric articulated by or attributed to the group. Acceptance creates reciprocity, which is required for individuals to establish moral obligations or a sense of affinity and feel the bonds of loyalty to the group. Finally, we found that rejection by the group does not necessarily undermine the strength of one's personal identity. Jonathan, whose patrilineal ties to Judaism often barred him from full participation in Orthodox Jewish worship, repeatedly asserted his Jewishness: "Who the hell is going to tell me I'm not Jewish?" Rather than forsaking his claims, he held fast to them, almost in defiance, as if his conviction were being tested. Andrew, who had no religious stirrings, but had developed a strong cultural identity as a Jew, defended the very bars that kept his brother out.

The acceptance–reciprocity dynamic is akin to belonging to a club and has an impact on the willingness to defend the members of the club. For example, Andrew, who reported not feeling like a full member in African American circles, confirmed a view generally held by American Jews: "In African American circles, there is a lot of real anti-Semitism." Yet not all subjects in this study sought membership in both clubs nor report experience of anti-Semitism and racism the same way. Josh, for example, viewed Judaism as an exclusive club that he did not want to belong to: "I'm part of the club but I don't like the club."

Nevertheless, subjects did not evince anguish or anger when discussing alleged discrimination from the group that they had rejected. Likewise, those who felt secure in their membership were more likely to defend the group, rationalize its behavior, or minimize the importance of racism or anti-Semitism. The most indicting comments came from subjects who had both sought membership in either group and experienced rejection. The more the subject felt excluded, the greater the frequency and importance of these charges, as if the very validation of Black anti-Semitism or Jewish racism validated the legitimacy of their own claims as Blacks and Jews.

## Notes

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30. All subjects' names have been changed.
31. Azoulay, "Jewishness After Mount Sinai," *Bridges* 9, no. 1 (2001) quoted in Kaye/Kantrowitz, *Colors of Jews*, 36, note 20.
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