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The Bomb: Black-Jewish Relations and Generation-X

By Daniel S. Brenner

Blacks are jealous of Israel, see the Holocaust as a ploy used to win Oscars, and see Jews as key players in the oppressive White majority. Jews imitate Black style, pretend to be sympathetic to their concerns, and ultimately prefer to live as far from them as possible.

Do these claims ring true? In most of what I read, there is a widely held assumption that the partnership between Blacks and Jews that historians view as so critical during the Civil Rights movement has fallen apart. Folks have tried to pin the break-up on fights over affirmative action, the flight of Jews to the suburbs and ex-urbs, the emergence of certain inflammatory Black leaders, and the shifting political alliances. But from my point of view as part of a group of Black and Jewish Generation-X writers who have been working in collaboration, I see another story emerging. And it's a story with some unexpected twists.

For the last four years my wife and I have worked with two Black writers on a

play called *Taking Names*, which is headed for its New York premiere at the end of the month. The play is about the convergence of Black and Jewish identity in a suburban family, but the real story is how the play came to be and the emerging direction of Black-Jewish relations I glimpsed along the way.

I grew up in a typical White-suburban neighborhood, in a fairly traditional Jewish family. But being a teen in the eighties exposed me to the marketing and mainstreaming of Black culture in ways that few generations before mine had seen. MTV had just come out. In high school, me and my debate team friends (all White except for a Black guy named "Big Ed" and Rajan, from India) used to break-dance to Doug E. Fresh, the Fatboys, and Krush Groove. By college I could recite every Public Enemy lyric, and countless other hip-hop rhymes. I was part of a nationwide phenomenon of "wiggers" - White boys who identified with Black dialect, dress, literary forms, and attitudes. To complement this I read Ellison, Baraka, and Morrison. Two summers during college I worked with Black and Latino kids at the Fresh Air Fund camps, and had thoroughly convinced myself that I was part of ghetto culture.

But something wasn't right with me taking on "Blackness". I knew that my role was as an outsider looking in, and I knew that there was a lot I would never know or experience about Black culture. I began to ask if I could find what I was looking for in Black culture in my own people's story and ritual life. And as my interest in Jewish life grew, and I decided to be a rabbi, I left a lot of this world behind. I did, however, begin to see Jewish texts and rituals through the insights that I had gained from learning a Black aesthetic. "How would Coltrane interpret Talmud?" I would ask myself. "How would Bill T. Jones bench lulav?" In addition to preserving these questions, I still kept in touch with one of the Black counselors, Noah Westmoreland, from the Fresh Air Fund.

In my last years of Rabbinical school, my wife had an idea that we get together a group of Blacks and Jews to study Exodus together. I was interested to hear the way in which Blacks responded to a story of slavery, and felt that their insights might add a layer of midrash to the tale. I called Noah, and we began to learn together.

In the following years, we studied Exodus, the classic midrashim, and more. Noah read the Passover Haggadah and we talked for hours about what it meant. With my wife and one of her friends from graduate school, we began to write a play based on the ideas that emerged from our exchange.

I imagined that when writing, we would each voice the perspectives that our people brought to the re-telling of Exodus. In writing, though, Noah's interest lead him to explore the point of view of a Jewish woman, a psychologist, who

was a child of a holocaust survivor. Noah asked: How would she view the Exodus? What would liberation mean for her? How did memory play a role in her healing? In a turn I did not expect, Noah began to see the world through the eyes of this fictional Jewish woman, and write words that spoke her truth.

Although Noah had known Jews in high school, he was never exposed to Jewish culture in the way that I was exposed, through mass media, to Black culture. Whereas I was immersed in hip-hop lyrics and African-American history, Noah had learned very little of Jewish culture outside of sitting through a couple of Bar Mitzvahs and watching some Holocaust movies.

But in the past year, I watched, rather amazed as he was able to get under the skin of an issue that Jews have only begun to wrestle with - how to be Jewish in a post-holocaust era.

So what do I make of all this?

For my generation, the search for meaning knows no boundaries. A Jewish guy can find it in hip-hop lyrics, and a Black guy in the Haggadah. Since we do not want any establishment to "own" culture or religion, we make it part of a wider synthesis of identity -- one in which we both find, and lose ourselves in the dialogue.

I'm not naive -- Blackness and Jewishness are still tethered to the "racial" and ethnic features of distinct communities. Yet while the vast majority of the Jews who worked in the civil rights movement were rejecting traditional Jewish religious life, today the many young Jews who are taking Jewish spirituality and learning seriously remain committed to dialogue with the African-American community. And in this post-modern reality, many of us are finding common ground that is connected not to a political agenda of the past, but to a search for meaning of the present.

There is hope for the future of the Black-Jewish relationship. Two peoples -- both with rich religious, literary and spiritual legacies - shall continue to engage in an exchange that goes beyond the stereotypes and will produce creative outcomes that will surpass our expectations.

Taking Names runs May 18-21 in Manhattan at the CSV Cultural Center. Call (212) 260-4080 x 17 for more information.



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