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America's Jews: Anti-Black Violence in Baltimore and the State of Black-Jewish Relations

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"[The black man] is the one who, on the American scene, has been the persecuted. He is, in truth, the American 'Jew?'"

-Rabbi Allan Miller

When I reflect on the relationship between Blacks and Jews, I go back to Freshman year of high school; where to get out of class ,I found myself attending something called the BLEWS forum (a title I found stood for the combination of BLacks and jEWS) . To my surprise, I learned Baltimore was home to one of the largest populations of Orthodox Jews outside of Israel (in fact just down the street from my elementary school). And that numerous institutions in the city, including the high school I attended, had been recipients of large amounts of funding from the Jewish community. This was presented to accentuate the historical connections between the Black and Jewish community, in the face of long-standing historical tensions. This came as a surprise to me, as not only was I NOT aware of (and thus obviously not harboring) the latent racial tensions the forum was suppose to be deconstructing, but from living my entire life in predominantly Black neighborhoods - I had literally no idea what a "Jew" even was. The reference only made sense

through obscure mentions in the sermons I was forced to every Sunday. I left sermons with a sole introduction to the idea of Judaism as manifested in: Hanukkah; which I was taught was a holiday where you celebrate some oil, a candle or something like that, and people get a day off from school. Transparently, I was given very little conceptual understanding of the history and the role that the Jewish community played in my city and my school. A clearer picture only came about later, as I began to realize the structural differences in my everyday life. For example, I discovered that ten-percent of my college-prep-magnet-school was Jewish and the ninety-percent was Black.

As a senior, I noticed that the top ten-percent of the class was actually the school's entire Jewish population. I wondered if there was a causal relationship. I began to notice things, like that the student parking lot (which I assumed to be unused since none of my friends had cars) would be occupied by some of the Jewish kids that I saw in my advanced classes; kids, like the guy on my lacrosse team, who was the only guy who could afford new gear and had a funny last name that people made fun of (Cohn). The more I observed, the more distinct the disparities grew, to the point where, ironically, the space for understanding the characteristics of "Jewish Culture" as such that was opened by that initial BLEWS conference, began to be filled with as many of the stereotypical conceptions of Jews, that the conferences was founded to prevent. Despite the talk of commonality and unity, the differences were too clearly on display for me to come to any other conclusion than believing that Jews are largely privileged and sheltered. Their comfort in school and society was made all the more annoying, by the complete lackthereof that comfort for the "other" ninety-percent.

So when a Jewish man assaulted a young Black man in Northwest Baltimore, and the respective political establishments responded, my experiences in high school immediately shaped my understanding of the issues and discourses at play. As well as they supported my need to go beyond the dominate narrative of simplistic multiculturalism, which often devolves into simplistic blaming-the-victim and historical amnesia. Instead, I was driven to take a deeper look at the structural explanations for the current state of the Black/Jewish relationships (or lackthereof).

In a violent city, such as Baltimore, an everyday street assault rarely makes the news. Normally, the events of November 19th, 2010, would hardly register on the political Richter Scale. They would've either been chalked-up to simple "boys will be boys" - or, at worst, as a violent whim of a twentysomething bully, who is unable to find someone his own size to pick on. However, when Eliyahu Werdesheim, a twenty-three-year-old former IDF member of the Jewish community, who had been in the policing group "Shomrim", saw a fifteen-year-old Black kid walking through his neighborhood, (allegedly) screamed, "You don't belong here!", and wrestled him to ground, breaking his wrist in the process, this second-degree assault knocked nearly every other story off the front page. After an initial sentencing and media storm, including extensive coverage of Black protesters demanding Werdesheim be punished, and Jewish and other commentators were portrayed defending Shomrim, the felony assault charges against Werdesheim were reduced to a misdemeanor. This reversal provoked backlash from many in the Black community.

Recently, it became known that Baltimore's Shomrim is being sued by controversial former attorney and documentary filmmaker: Leonard Kerpelman. Kerpelman claims that in 2008, a member of the group accosted him for (what they claimed was illegal) filming of members in the Jewish Orthodox community. The filming was for one of his documentaries. The attack left him, his camera, and the already battered image of Shomrim, bruised in the process.

The status quo of race relations in Baltimore, with isolated, homogeneous pockets of deep Black

poverty surrounding enclaves of equally homogeneous Jewish wealth, creates prime conditions that perpetuate, to use old Cold War terminology, a “mutual misunderstanding”. This “mutual misunderstanding” explains the Park Heights attack and much of contemporary Black/Jewish relations. Yet, in order to properly understand what is to be done, it is important to probe the HOW and WHY this misunderstanding exists.

Much of this work has been effectively done by Northwestern University Professor Charles Mills in his book *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. Here Mills puts the Black /Jewish relationship in historical, psychological, and philosophical context. He explains how the Black community processes the Jewish community through a lens of historic mistrust of and anger against those coded as white. For example, he explains why Blacks are more likely to believe in stereotypical “Jews taking over the world” conspiracy theories. From poll taxes and literacy tests, serving as subtle disenfranchisement in the South, to red line segregation and Gerrymandering in the North, the Black experience in America has been one of subtle, institutionalized, and often indeed secret attempts at control by whites, with often serious consequences for the Blacks on the business end of the “conspiracy” (See the Tuskegee syphilis experiments of 1932-72). Thus, the mistrust of the Jewish community, that many Jewish commentators have produced as a justification for things like Shomrim, stems from the same history of oppression against Blacks that these commentators fail to account for. Taking this notion a step further, Mills uses this to deconstruct the trope of “Black criminality”, (cf. “Correlating Blackness and Criminality” by Thomas Keyes)—the unfounded idea that Blacks are culturally predisposed to committing crimes, a fear most common used (whether tacitly or overtly) as a justification for Werdesheim’s actions and Shomrim Baltimore’s existence.

Mills explains that in the face of historic humiliation and emasculation of Black men, resistance to what is seen as the “oppressor” becomes not only a means of reclaiming one’s manhood, but protecting one’s community. Huey Newton notes repeatedly in his autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide*, that he felt his childhood shoplifting from local merchants was justified because they were sucking the resources out of his community. This cultural practice of resistance gives historical and social explanation for the property crime Shomrim cites as one of the main things they seek to deter. Within this understanding of the reasons behind Black “criminality”, it appears likely that Shomrim’s (literally) heavy-handed tactics will likely have the exact opposite of their intended effect. If Black deviance is rooted in these notions of self-affirmation and community protection, then the aggressive policing approach serves only to make Shomrim a new entity to rebel against, a proxy for the system of Whiteness that young Black men, like the one assaulted, can now focus their resistance against. Moreover, it seems likely it will only serve to perpetuate the view among Blacks, that Jews have no interest in helping their communities- that they only wish to continue making profit and controlling their communities for the sake of creating “stability and safety”. Both of which are seen, in Black communities, as code words for: creating communities where Blacks are either forcibly excluded or controlled by a paramilitary force. After all, if it is the mere presence of Blacks that is a threat to security (a notion supported by Werdesheim’s cry “You don’t belong here!” before the attack). The reasoning is: What other solution is there other than to forcibly exclude them? Of course, this logic is the same that separates communities and why so many generations of young Black men (including myself as a youth) never see or think about the Jewish community, until something like this happens. These exclusions create such anger that breeds resistances and continues the cycle of “mutual misunderstanding” into perpetuity.

Of course, one could counter that these historical inconveniences should be second to a

community's right to self-defense and defense of property. One imagines a defender of Shomrim, echoing a famous line by the Mossad Agent, Ephraim, in the Spielberg movie *Munich*, who when confronted with the self-defeating logic of Israel's assassination of terrorists, sarcastically quips, "Why cut my finger nails? They'll grow back". This raises the problematic other side of mutual misunderstanding, the way the Jewish community views Blacks. Despite consistent claims that many Jews are somehow outside the system of "Whiteness" that has dictated racial privilege in America, Mills notes that in many ways the American Jewish Community has been assimilated into Whiteness. As such, many have adopted the same anti-Black views that have served as a precondition for this status. Mills notes that the exact same dynamic at work with Blacks, is at work with Whites, where Jews code Blacks as "against Jews" through the previously explained instance of perceived Black Anti-Semitism, precipitating Jewish self-affirmation through resistance to Blackness. Many Jews look and wonder how they could succeed in acquiring material security and even affluence in America, while Blacks have failed. They assume that Blacks must somehow be at fault for this failure, erroneously deleting out both the history of institutionalized Black dispossession and how Jews have benefited (be it less than other European immigrant groups) from White privilege (Mills, 81).

It is this mentality that has led some groups to affirm that they will protect what they have "earned" by any means necessary, leading to armed Shomrim groups patrolling the streets of Connecticut. In this context, the analogy to the movie *Munich* seems especially apt, considering Werdesheim is a former member of the Israeli army. The fear of the brown other, whether it be in Baltimore or Bethlehem, makes violence against the other justifiable, making anti-Blackness a universal law that supersedes the actual letter of the laws. The disregard for written law can be seen as part of Shomrim modus operatus. Baltimore's Shomrim group runs crime reporting telephone lines parallel to those of the Baltimore Police Department, allowing crimes to get handled exclusively by Shomrim (and thus go unreported to the BPD). Brooklyn's Shomrim all but advertises this circumvention of the law as a goal of the institution, noting that when getting a report on Jew-on-Jew crime their procedure is to call the Rabbi before calling the police (one can only assume that none Jews are not afforded any similar courtesy). What is most shocking about this is not just how brazen the Shomrim groups have been, but how their aggressive community defense, bordering on vigilantism, has been accepted and supported by the local police departments and the press. After the incident, the Baltimore Sun's coverage was decidedly one-sided, noting the many people who came out in support of Shomrim while publishing a letter to the editor criticizing Black leaders who voiced opposition, wondering why they weren't as angry over black-on-black crime. This illustrates how convoluted the racial discourse has become in relation to these issues. For example, one wonders how the failure of Black leadership to stop Black-on-Black crime somehow exonerates Werdesheim, but of course exonerating Werdesheim (aka: addressing the issue) is not the point of these responses. They are more accurately read as attempts to blindly deny the existence of institutional racism by making the issue personal, as opposed to structural. Dually glossing over the fundamental point, that no one wants to talk about in relation to question of Black/Jewish relations and inter-group violence. In America, Blacks are at the bottom of the racial totem pole, making violence against them, even by paramilitary vigilantes, more acceptable.

This raises the inevitable question of how the Jewish experience of persecution and the role Jews played in the Civil Rights struggle relates to these questions of Black/Jewish relations anti-Black racism in the Jewish community. Those that argue that Jewish oppression and Civil Rights activism disproves anti-Blackness in Jewish community show a fundamental misunderstanding of what racism is and how it operates, as racism is a power relationship based on historical privilege

and positions of power, NOT individuals holding bias views (as we have all been taught). The history of America shows that these two groups have held distinct positions in relation to access to power, creating Blackness as the foundation of America's racial hierarchy. Mills relays a list written by Laurence Thomas (a Black Jewish theorist) of nineteen differences between the Jewish-American experience and the African-Experience, Some of which are listed below:

- “1. Jews were displaced from their homeland but generally retained their identity, traditions, family structure, and cultural control of their lives. 'Black' is a new identity forged out of the forced bringing together in the West, of many different African peoples with no common language, whose families were often broken up by slavery and who were, until recently, largely deprived of literacy and told that they had no real culture or history.
2. Jews were enslaved at a time when slavery was standard practice throughout the world and was not linked to race; Blacks were enslaved during the modern period, when slavery was dead or dying out in the West, so that "slavery acquired a color" and Black features became the racial stigmata of subordination.
3. Israel received reparations from Germany for the crimes of the Jewish Holocaust; African-Americans and Caribbeans have yet to receive reparations from the American or European governments for the crimes of slavery and the African Holocaust. (In fact, it was the former slave owners who, after emancipation, were compensated for the loss of their property)
4. Because of the phenotypical closeness of Jews and Gentile whites, as against Blacks and Whites, the perceived need (given the internalization of a racist aesthetic) for transformative cosmeticization is much more foundational and pervasive for the Black body than for the Jewish body (a technologically unrealizable change of skin, to begin with, as against occasional rhinoplasty).
5. The classic racist stereotypes differ crucially in that Jews are generally credited with (sometimes supernormal) intelligence. Whereas Blacks are traditionally represented as bestial, subnormal. Thus, the most famous anti-Semitic document, the forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion, credits Jews with the ability to plan and carry out a takeover of the world. Insofar as racist propaganda allocates blacks a contributory role in such an enterprise (however worthy), by contrast, it is basically as foot soldiers... muscle.
6. From the time race becomes an important category in the European colonization and settling of North America, Jews have generally been socially categorized as 'white,' albeit stigmatized "off-whites." Blacks, on the other hand, have always been "nonwhite," indeed the paradigm nonwhites on whose subordination the system has been based.
7. The tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust is commemorated in popular culture (movies, TV), and thus imprinted on mass consciousness, in a way that the African Holocaust is not, though the latter's effects continue to make themselves felt in the degraded position of Africa and African-Americans.
8. In North America, the Jewish community is on the whole far more politically organized than the Black community, a reflection on: of class differences, a greater degree of assimilation, and (given Black disenfranchisement) a longer history of political activism. In addition, in the United States for many decades, Jews were a prime source of funding for Black civil rights organizations. On the

one hand, a tribute to the anti-racist commitments of many Jews. Yet, on the other, the foundation of a differential power relationship. The overall result is that Jewish-Black political relations have generally not been peer-to-peer relations but have been viewed by many Blacks as paternalistic.

9. Israel is seen as part of the West; the decolonized African nations are not.

10. In the postwar period, after the revelations of the death camps, racist ideology of the anti-Semitic kind ceased to be respectable in the West. By contrast, anti-Black racist ideology never died, and from the late 1960s onward it has had a dramatic resurgence in the form of IQ theory (alleged lower Black intelligence) and some interpretations of sociobiology (alleged greater Black propensity for violence)." (Mills, 83-86).

The goal of relaying this list is not to enact the dreaded "Oppression Olympic" - i.e.: trying to show that Blacks take the gold medal for suffering. No, rather, it is to show that there are real, material, and historically verifiable differences between the Black community and the Jewish community. We need to place Jews, by and large, in the position of beneficiaries of racial privilege, and place Blacks as not only excluded from, but often providers of, that racial privilege to other groups, including Jews.

The two groups simply occupy different positions in society, and if tensions between the groups are to ever end the reality of this must be acknowledged. Shomrim's cultural practice of contacting the Rabbi before the police is respected by the police; Black cultural practices were destroyed in the genocide of the middle passage and through years of state-mandated assimilation and segregation. Additionally, there are subtle but important differences between the Jewish Holocaust and the so-called "Black Holocaust" of the Middle Passage, as UC Irvine professor Frank Wilderson writes:

"The violence that turns the African into a thing is without analog because it does not simply oppress the Black through tactile and empirical technologies of oppression... Rather, the gratuitous violence of the Black, first ontological instance, the Middle Passage, 'wiped out [his or her] metaphysics his, [or her] customs and sources on which they are based:' Jews went into Auschwitz and came out as Jews. Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks. The former is a Human holocaust; the latter is a Human and a metaphysical holocaust. That is why it makes little sense to attempt analogy: the Jews have the Dead (the Muselmann) among them; the Dead have the Blacks among them." (Wilderson, 38).

It is this cultural genocide that makes the black experience in America distinct, creating Blackness as the site of, in Wilderson terms, "absolute dereliction" where gratuitous violence, like that of Werdeshim, can be deemed acceptable against them alone since their being is not registered in society. Baltimore Shomrim gets their picture taken with the mayor, while any equivalent modes of "street justice" practiced in Black communities are deemed deviant and illegal. Going back to Huey Newton, one need only consider the difference in public and institutional response to the Black Panthers attempts at community self-defense (i.e. state co-optation and violent destruction and assassination) and the response to Shomrim (community support and police backing). Jews can be trusted to go outside the letter of the law, because, as the history of law in America shows, two of its central tenets have been the protection of property and the control of people of color. By making both concepts central to their operation, Shomrim thus adheres to the spirit of the law, thus explaining why they can supported by the political establishment and law enforcement. Continued ignorance of these facts will only make further tension and violence inevitable, create a cycle of

“mutual misunderstanding” that threatens to continually feed upon itself in perpetuity, keeping the two communities separated and antagonistic.

Mills ends his piece by submitting recommendations to both groups, ones both Blacks and Jews would do well to seriously consider. For Blacks, Mills reiterates the essential notion of being sure you correctly identify your enemies, which he points out is NOT Jews, but the system of white supremacy that subordinates Blacks as a group. The trial of Werdesheim starts in early May, (addendum this has since been delayed) and while the impulse of many in Black Baltimore would be to vilify him and demand “justice” in the form of a tough sentence, it’s essential to understand that true justice will never come until the functioning of institutional oppression and the larger structure of anti-Blackness is understood. As frustrating as it is for Blacks to think of the violence of Shomrim, both the everyday violence of structural poverty and physical violence from the police are the more pressing issues. Attacking Shomrim’s right to police their communities is a seductively simple solution to the larger problems in the city, problems that will only be solved when Blacks as a community take ownership over their own communities. Also, it’s important to remember that the assertion of self-respect and humanity can never come at the cost of another’s humanity; especially of those who can (and indeed in the past have been) great allies to the struggle for Black equality.

For the Jewish community, Mills recommends a reassessment of traditional relationships of processing all perceived affronts to Judaism or threats to the Jewish community through the post-Holocaust lens of demonizing anyone or anything seen as a potential danger. When grafted onto Blacks it ignores the historical uniqueness of Black denigration in America, casting some of the people most negatively affected by the rise of America as the “new threat” and thus ignoring the historical conditions that created this “threat.” He adds that Jews must come to grips with their status in America, and make amends for the racial privileges that facilitate their advancement in America, concluding that:

“Difficult and astonishing as it may be to accept, then, unthinkable and incongruent as it is with the defining Jewish narrative, the fact has to be faced that Jews in the West are now unequivocally part of the privileged race. As Nat Hentoff says in his introduction to the same anthology, ‘We are, all of us who are white, the goyim in America.’ Updating your narrative means realizing this fact and recognizing that—in addition to your own heroic efforts—part of the reason for your success on this continent is that doors have been opened for you that were closed to nonwhites. Whatever your personal feelings and political views, you are objectively socially advantaged by your racial characterization. Your moral responsibility now, as privileged members of society—indeed, the moral responsibility of all whites of goodwill—is to throw your political and organizational weight behind the opening of these doors to everyone...” (Mills, 95).

This means we must go beyond the simple, color-blind multiculturalism that has been the dominate lens through which these issues have been filtered. If Blacks and Jews are ever to have alliances (or before that, peaceful coexistence) a sense of shared community must be built between the two groups. No longer can we afford to have generations of young black kids in Baltimore, like me, growing up with no knowledge of a community only a few minutes away, only to understand the other through the lens of conflict.

We cannot simply throw together forums that “celebrate diversity” (like the BLUES forum) and call it productive dialogue. As long time organizer Joseph Barnt points out, these types of engagement can only hope at best to promote an ideology of personal none racism , still missing the boat by

focusing on personal biases. The only truly moral option is to unite around a new form of anti-racist activism, which seeks to actively combat and demolish the political structures of White Supremacy that drove both the Holocaust and the transatlantic slave trade. Blacks were turned into "America's Jews", and the sooner the Jewish community comes to understand America's history, the sooner incidents like that in Northwest Baltimore become history.

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CASE UPDATE: The Shomrim Trial has been rescheduled from May 2nd to July 12th. Supposedly, for the defendants, the Werdesheim's, to have more time to prepare.

-Lawrence Grandpre is a member of Baltimore think-tank *Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle*[5].

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