

# THE UNITED STATES: REVIVING AN ALLIANCE

Last year, as the rapper Ye (formerly known as Kanye West) was having a very public antisemitic meltdown, some on the political right asserted that his antics were not the rantings of a self-described bipolar person, but rather a manifestation of a larger and more troubling problem: Black antisemitism.<sup>1</sup> A concurrent scandal involving Kyrie Irving, a Black professional basketball player who promoted an antisemitic documentary on social media, along with several violent attacks on visibly Jewish New Yorkers – some of which were committed by Black perpetrators – fed the perception that the African American community was simmering with rage against Jews.

The three-month period when these incidents were unfolding (October to December 2022) marked a nadir in Black-Jewish relations and possibly the lowest point since the Crown Heights riots in 1991.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the year that has passed since then, some heartening progress has been made to repair the historical Black-Jewish alliance.

The most significant development was the July relaunch of the Congressional Caucus on Black-Jewish Relations, with the backing of the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the National Urban League. The purpose of the Caucus, initially launched in 2019, is “to ensure open dialogue and partnership between the two communities.”<sup>3</sup> In the past, the Caucus supported legislation to combat all forms of racism, convened a roundtable of Black and Jewish organizations, and joined social media campaigns in support of American Jews.

In the realm of academia, there have been some creative efforts to address antisemitism on college campuses. David Machlin, an economics professor at Adelphi University in Long Island, New York, organized a trip for 18 Black and Jewish students to visit both the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Machlin said the purpose of the March trip was “to motivate students to all use their platform and stand up to combat racism, intolerance and antisemitism together.” He noted that “antisemitism

<sup>1</sup> “Black antisemitism,” though widely used in the popular press, is a fraught term, as it suggests (wrongly, I believe) that antisemitism emanating from the African American community is somehow different, and possibly more sinister, than antisemitism emanating from other racial, ethnic or religious groups. No serious person describes the actions of, for example, the white nationalists who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2018 chanting “Jews will not replace us” as “white antisemitism” or the violent acts of Hamas terrorists as “Muslim antisemitism.” So why should we use it here simply as shorthand for the antisemitic beliefs that some, but not all, Black people hold.

<sup>2</sup> On August 19, 1991, a car in the motorcade of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of the Chabad Hasidic movement, struck two Black children, one of whom died. The accident touched off several days of rioting, during which Black residents of Crown Heights attacked Orthodox Jews and looted businesses. One Jewish man was murdered, and dozens were injured.

<sup>3</sup> “American Jewish Committee Helps Relaunch Congressional Black-Jewish Caucus,” American Jewish Committee, July 13, 2023, <https://www.ajc.org/news/american-jewish-committee-helps-relaunch-congressional-black-jewish-caucus>.

is not just a Jewish issue, nor should combatting racism be just a Black issue.”<sup>4</sup> Adelphi University received a Higher Education Excellence in Diversity award in recognition of the Two Museums Program (TMP) and other diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Machlis solicited feedback from the students and staff who participated in the program. One Black student wrote that it “helped me truly witness and understand the destruction that ignorance can bring to a group of people. If there’s one thing I took away from TMP, it’s to be proactive rather than reactive.” A Jewish student wrote that: “receiving a greater understanding of how these groups were and still are oppressed and hated drives me to want to do more in the fight against hatred, oppression, antisemitism, and racism.” A Black member of the Adelphi staff who went on the trip wrote: “It reminds me that we are only one evil thought away from having these same acts of violence committed on mankind, and we must be hypervigilant about hate speech and hate acts of violence.”

Machlis said he planned to take another group of students to the museums in the fall of 2024. In the meantime, he is raising money to expand the program to other universities within driving distance of the two museums and to record related video content that can be distributed online.

At Xavier University of Louisiana, a historically Black Catholic university, a group of students created a series of videos to educate students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs, institutions of higher education established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the purpose of serving mainly blacks) about the history of Black-Jewish allyship. In the videos, the students ask their peers trivia questions such as “Which HBCU did Albert Einstein guest lecture at?” and “What was the name of the Jewish civil rights activist who helped found the NAACP?”

Jamaya Davis, a co-creator of the Still We R.O.S.E. project, said the goal was to “break down barriers...and reach across the aisle with open hearts and minds.” The Department of Homeland Security awarded it first place in its Invent2Prevent competition, which encourages students to develop projects to prevent violence and terrorism in their communities.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond university campuses, public lectures and conversations involving Jews, non-Jewish Black people and Black Jews were held in cities across the United States. For example, in the Bay Area of California, a group of artists and activists held a series of panel discussions at local high schools about the history of Black-Jewish relations and the points of tension between the communities.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2022, ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt announced that the organization would hold “community conversations” to build bridges between African Americans and Jews. “I think so often our communities don’t interact, don’t engage, don’t hear one another,” he said

<sup>4</sup> Sara Weissman, “Addressing an ‘Epidemic’ of Hatred,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/30/inaugural-trip-black-and-jewish-adelphi-students>.

<sup>5</sup> Gina Christian, “‘Still We R.O.S.E.’—Xavier University of Louisiana Students Win National Prize for Project Countering antisemitism,” *The Dialog*, July 21, 2023, <https://thedialog.org/black-catholics/still-we-r-o-s-e-xavier-university-of-louisiana-students-win-national-prize-for-project-countering-antisemitism/>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Esensten, “What Does the Black-Jewish Alliance Look Like in 2023? In a Word, Messy,” *J. The Jewish News of Northern California*, February 2, 2023, <https://jweekly.com/2023/02/02/what-does-the-black-jewish-alliance-look-like-in-2023-in-a-word-messy/>.

on “The Breakfast Club,” a popular morning show on a hip-hop radio station in New York.<sup>7</sup> A spokesperson said ADL had begun planning those conversations with input from the family of Martin Luther King, Jr., National Action Network and other partners. However, the spokesperson said the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October forced ADL to postpone further planning until a later date.

Online, a small group of content creators who are both Black and Jewish have been pushing back against antisemitic stereotypes, Holocaust denialism and criticism of Israel in videos they post on Instagram and TikTok. They include Tova Ricardo (@tovathepoet), Raven Schwam-Curtis (@ravenreveals), Shekhiynah Larks (@shekhiynahl), and others. By sharing their stories and knowledge, these creators are allowing social media users to see the diversity and complexity of the American Jewish community.

Ricardo, for example, expresses her pride in being both Black and Jewish on Instagram, where she has more than 13,000 followers and posts calls to action. “You don’t need to be Black to stand up for Black lives,” she wrote on May 9, 2022.<sup>8</sup> “You don’t need to be Jewish to stand up for Jewish lives. Hating Black folks won’t end antisemitism. Hating Jewish people won’t end anti-Black racism.”

Schwam-Curtis, who has over 100,000 followers on TikTok, has created videos on an array of topics, including her identity as a Black Jew, Jewish communities around the world, Jewish traditions, race, and whiteness. One of her most popular videos, which was viewed 1.5 million times, is titled “Unpacking Black and Jewish Stereotypes.”<sup>9</sup> Her content caught the attention of the White House, which invited her to interview Doug Emhoff, the Jewish husband of Vice President Kamala Harris, about his efforts to combat antisemitism.

Some of the videos that Larks posts for her 35,000 followers on TikTok deal with race and white supremacy in the US. In an October 2022 video, she argues that the idea that Black people are “the original Jews” – an idea promoted by Ye and radical Hebrew Israelites – is an antisemitic lie. “Have there always been Black Jews? Yes,” she says in the video, which has been viewed 222,000 times and received 1,500 comments. “Is every Black person Jewish? No. Was there ever a point where every single Black person was Jewish? No.”<sup>10</sup>

She has also posted videos addressing misconceptions about the Holocaust, such as that it was an instance of “white on white” violence. In 2021, Larks called out a popular Black TikTok

<sup>7</sup> The Breakfast Club, “Jonathan Greenblatt on Combatting Anti-Semitism...,” YouTube, December 7, 2022, <https://youtu.be/wVXclclBtTU?feature=shared>.

<sup>8</sup> Tova Ricardo (@tovathepoet), “You Don’t Need to be Black...,” Instagram, May 9, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdW1zYcpG2z/>.

<sup>9</sup> Raven Schwam-Curtis (@ravenreveals), “Jokes Like This are a Reminder...,” TikTok, June 21, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@ravenreveals/video/7247179583500389678?lang=en>.

<sup>10</sup> Shekhiynah Larks (@shekhiynahl), [No Video Title], TikTok, October 13, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@shekhiynahl/video/7154191665597615402?lang=en>.

creator who “liked” an antisemitic video about Anne Frank. She encouraged him to do teshuva (atonement), and in response, he vowed to do better.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of the above-described initiatives cannot be overstated. Since at least the 1960s, surveys have shown that African Americans hold antisemitic views at higher rates than members of other racial groups in the U.S. A 1964 survey by the Anti-Defamation League – then known as the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith – found that 45% of African Americans were prejudiced against Jews. By 1992, the percentage of African Americans who ranked the “most antisemitic” in their views, according to the ADL, declined to 37%. However, that was still more than twice the percentage of white people (17%) who earned the same ignominious designation. Notably, these percentages declined as the level of the respondents’ education increased.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, a 2016 ADL survey found that 23% of African Americans showed “antisemitic propensities,” compared to 14% of the general population and that these percentages had been consistent since 2007.<sup>13</sup> Any reasonable person would say the data reveal a real and troubling phenomenon. In a New York Times column last year, the Black, non-Jewish scholar Michael Eric Dyson wrote, “Black antisemitism is real; so is Jewish racism.”<sup>14</sup> Another Black, non-Jewish commentator, Mike Freeman, argued in USA Today that “there is a significant strain of antisemitism among Black Americans” and that Black people have a “blind spot” when it comes to Jews.<sup>15</sup>

Black Jews, who as members of both Black and Jewish communities have more skin in the game, frame the issue differently. “There needs to be a moratorium on the phrase ‘Black antisemitism.’ It’s the same antisemitism,” Yitz Jordan, the Black Jewish rapper who goes by Y-Love, told me in a recent interview. He said Black people are just as susceptible as non-Black people to picking up and spreading antisemitic stereotypes and conspiracy theories.

Kendell Pinkney, a Black rabbi, echoed that sentiment in a 2022 essay. “Despite the number of books on such topics,” he wrote in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “Black antisemitism is not a thing, just like Jewish anti-Blackness is not a thing. Rather, antisemitism and anti-Blackness are long-standing structures of social prejudice that all peoples and societies fall prey to.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Greschler, “TikTok User Who ‘Liked’ Antisemitic Video Gets a Lesson in Atonement,” *J. The Jewish News of Northern California*, February 4, 2021, <https://jweekly.com/2021/02/04/tiktok-user-who-liked-antisemitic-video-gets-a-lesson-in-atonement/>.

<sup>12</sup> “20% in U.S. Hold Bias Against Jews,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/22/us/20-in-us-hold-bias-against-jews.html>.

<sup>13</sup> “A Survey about Attitudes Toward Jews in America,” Anti-Defamation League, 2016, [https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/ADL\\_MS\\_Survey\\_Pres\\_1\\_25\\_17.pdf](https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/ADL_MS_Survey_Pres_1_25_17.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, “Black and Jews, Again,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/20/opinion/kyrie-irving-kanye-west-antisemitism.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Freeman, “Black Athletes and My Community’s Blind Spot When It Comes to Antisemitism,” *USA Today*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/columnist/mike-freeman/2022/11/02/black-athletes-community-blind-spot-antisemitism/10652472002/>.

<sup>16</sup> Kendall Pinkney, “Kanye West’s Hate Speech Awakens My ‘Triple Consciousness’ of being Black, Jewish and American,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/2022/11/02/ideas/kanye-wests-hate-speech-awakens-my-triple-consciousness-of-being-black-jewish-and-american>.

The sources of Black resentment toward American Jews have changed over time. Still, it is generally understood that the fundamental tension is over Jews' success at becoming "white," meaning they achieved levels of social acceptance and economic and political power that Black people and other people of color have been unable to achieve due to the forces of white supremacy. As James Baldwin wrote in an oft-cited 1967 essay: "The Jew profits from his status in America, and he must expect Negroes to distrust him for it. The Jew does not realize that the credential he offers, the fact that he has been despised and slaughtered, does not increase the Negro's understanding. It increases the Negro's rage."<sup>17</sup>

Baldwin described other resentments, including economic ones (he wrote that many landlords and shopkeepers in Black neighborhoods of New York were unscrupulous Jews) and philosophical ones (he asserted that Jews could not fully understand how "desperate" the plight of African Americans was at that time).

In the civil rights movement, Jews and Black people famously collaborated to achieve racial justice gains. Then, during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Black activists pushed Jews and other white liberals out of civil rights organizations in the name of Black self-determination.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, certain racialized forms of antisemitism<sup>19</sup> emerged from new religious movements that were exclusively or predominantly Black. They include the Nation of Islam, whose leader, Louis Farrakhan, rails against "the Satanic Jew" in speeches, and the more extremist of the Hebrew Israelite sects that blame (white) Jews for stealing their identity from them. (It is worth noting that only a small percentage of the African American population belongs to these movements.)

Today, one of the major wedge issues is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some Black people sympathize with the Palestinians, whom they see as an oppressed people of color fighting against European colonizers. Black opposition to Israel goes back to at least 1967, when, following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee published an article in its newsletter calling Israel an "illegal state" and accusing it of mistreating both Arabs and dark-skinned Jews.<sup>20</sup> In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives, which represented more than 50 Black organizations, published a platform in which it described Israel as an "apartheid state" that was carrying out a "genocide" of the Palestinians. Israel was the only country other than the USA that the Movement for Black Lives mentioned in the foreign policy section of its platform. For their part, Jews have felt betrayed when Black leaders failed to quickly and forcefully denounce antisemitic speech or violence by members of their communities.

<sup>17</sup> James Baldwin, "Negroes are Antisemitic because They're Anti-White," *New York Times*, April 9, 1967, [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antsem.html?source=post\\_elevate\\_sequence\\_page](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antsem.html?source=post_elevate_sequence_page).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the history of the Black-Jewish alliance, see "Strangers & Neighbors: Relations between Blacks & Jews in the United States," edited by Maurianne Adams and John Bracey (1999); "Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America" by Jonathan Kaufman (1995); and "Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s" by Marc Dollinger (2018), among other titles.

<sup>19</sup> Antisemitism Worldwide Report for 2022, Tel Aviv University and Anti-Defamation League, April 2023, [https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-04/AntisemitismWorldwide\\_e.pdf](https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-04/AntisemitismWorldwide_e.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> SNCC Newsletter, June-July 1967, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/6707\\_sncc\\_news-r.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/6707_sncc_news-r.pdf). Civil rights leaders A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin condemned the article as antisemitic.

## Policy Recommendations

1. **Empower Black Jews** to lead educational and other outreach efforts in Black communities. Black Jews and other Jews of color typically enjoy greater credibility in Black spaces, yet the number of Black Jews in leadership positions at major American Jewish organizations remains low. In 2020, a study found that only two of the 51 member groups in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations had a Black Jew on their board of directors.<sup>21</sup> These organizations need to make concerted efforts to recruit and retain Black Jewish leaders.
2. **Amplify the voices of Black Jewish** content creators on social media. In many cases, these creators can communicate more effectively with non-white users than white Jewish creators. The audience for their messages on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok is huge and skews young, meaning they have the ability to shape perspectives on issues concerning Jews, Judaism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
3. **Reciprocity is important**, and efforts to combat antisemitism in the Black community must accompany efforts to combat anti-Black racism in the Jewish community where it exists.

– **Andrew Esensten**

<sup>21</sup> Robin Washington, “Appoint Black Jews to Major Organization Boards — Now,” *MyJewishLearning*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2020/06/17/appoint-black-jews-to-major-organization-boards-now/>.