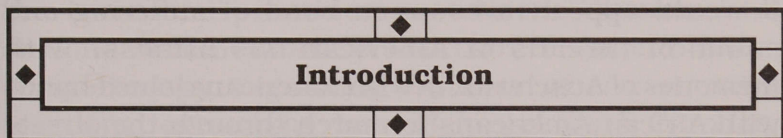


## What Direction Did That Train Go?\*



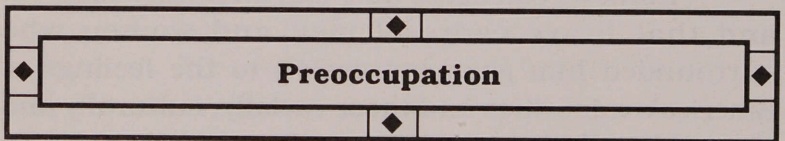
African American and Jewish people were run over, mauled and dragged by a fast moving train thirty-five years ago. Sadly, during the intervening years we have been so incapacitated that we do not have a description of the train, its direction or its final destination. Only now, after several years, Dillard University and the New Orleans Jewish Community are attempting to assemble the pieces. Not until we understand more clearly what happened to the coalition forged between African Americans and Jews can we address this issue.

I think we can agree that Martin Luther King, Jr. and that brave cadre of men and women who surrounded him gave expression to the feelings of America's minorities and those racially, culturally and geographically marginalized and excluded. Martin's voice was clear. It sounded a note for African Americans who had suffered the savagery of the passages from Africa to the new world. His was the voice that convinced African Americans that by persistence and a willingness to risk suffering and subscribe to non-violence, their cause could be won. He convinced local, state and federal agencies that the shackles of economic, social, political and other fetters had to be removed.

---

\*April 1995

I contend that African-Americans' closest allies during this period were Jewish Americans. There was, it would appear, a common bond of suffering and common threads of American wistfulness. With memories of Auschwitz, Jewish Americans joined hands with African Americans to march through the streets of Selma, the halls of Congress and the chamber of the Supreme Court. Much of the financial support to undergird the movement came from Jews of every description, every station in life. They saw the Civil Rights movement as the moral equivalent of their own aspirations, indeed, the legitimation of their own struggle against anti-Semitism and social ostracism. Some of the nation's leading Jewish citizens joined the cause. Though delayed, victory was assured. At least partial victory came with the Voter's Rights Bill and legislation against discrimination in employment, housing and public facilities.

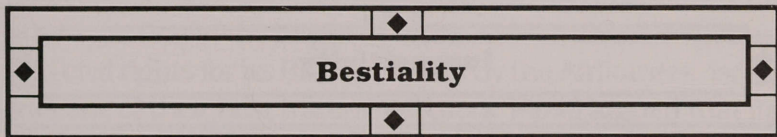


Preoccupation is a deadly involvement. That which causes me concern is the absorption of legislators and senators to embarrass President Clinton with Whitewater and derail much of his health and economic agendas. A similar ploy happened during the late sixties and early seventies. While African Americans and Jews wallowed in the gains just made, the country was preoccupied with Vietnam. Resources were diverted to waging an unpopular, expensive and demoralizing jungle war in this southeastern Asian country.

Preoccupation continued with the acceleration of the cold war, the maturation of the Chinese Communist, the increased prominence of North Vietnam and factions within Cambodia and Laos. President Nixon, supported by a growing number of conservative reactionaries such as Jesse Helms of North Carolina, eliminated programs for low cost and subsidized housing and job training. At the height of dismantling federally supported programs, the President became entrapped by Watergate, resulting in his discrediting resignation.

President Jimmy Carter's term of service created a flicker of hope on the American scene. A man with pure motives, Carter was ensnared by a destabilizing inflation spiral which prompted interest and mortgage rates to exceed twenty percent. This, along with the American hostages in Iran, sealed his fate, opened the door for Ronald Reagan to become President of the United States.

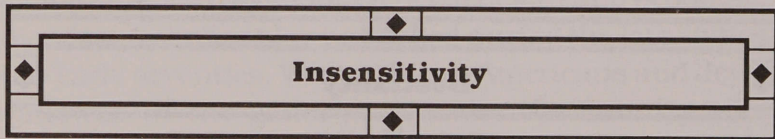
During the Reagan years, 1980-1988, relations between African Americans and Jews began to disintegrate. In fact, these were the years when, in my opinion, the moral fiber of our nation took a turn for the worse. While espousing morality and values, Reagan unleashed on America a mean-spirited conservatism that catered to the nation's baser nature. He elevated meanness to a plateau of acceptability.



Attempting to describe the train that "floored us," one of its "coaches" is what I term bestiality. Supported

by the "Religious Right," whose chief lieutenants were Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and others, President Nixon steered the nation into a period characterized by what I call bestiality. Like animals we were turned on each other. Comments could be heard: "AIDS is God's judgment," "Poverty is a figment of the imagination," and "Anyone desiring to work can do so." The mean-spiritedness of these years prepared the soil for the seeds of Rush Limbaugh to take root and flourish.

The point here is that just after African Americans and Jews had evidenced a hopeful relationship, they, like all other marginalized groups in America, became victims of an unexpected phenomenon. Insecurity, scarcity of jobs, housing, mobility, and fear of cultural assimilation fanned the flames of insecurity among both Blacks and Jews. Competition rather than cooperation crept into the equation. Blacks, many of whom felt that Jews could find acceptance by melting into the color scheme of white America, began to think and act in bizarre ways. The flap we hear today from Khalid Abdul Muhammad, supported in principle by Louis Farrakhan, is the sound of power seeking additional power. The Nation of Islam is attempting to mend its fences in the Black Community, appearing militantly helpful to African Americans who feel helpless, hopeless and forgotten.



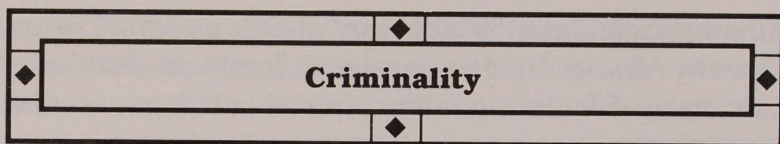
A second "coach" that "knocked us for a loop" might be termed insensitivity. There is a tendency

among some Jews to label any attack on Israel or on Jews by African Americans as anti-Semitism. Similarly, too many Blacks consider Jewish criticism racist posturing.

The insensitivity of which I speak has national and international roots. It is not always mean-spirited or intentionally demeaning but the result of failing to consider how an action might affect another person. It can be interpreted as a conflict of competing values. On the one hand, because Jews have a history of living under a ceiling lowered by the imposition of quotas, their natural inclination is to oppose quotas of any description. On the other hand, the floor was the ceiling for many African Americans. Since the days of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, separate but equal, the reality of life in this nation was separate but unequal. The promises of upward mobility were often denied in alarming doses. Affirmative Action Programs, such as the Bakke case, were almost universally attacked by Jews.

Jesse Jackson, the only Black man ever to make a serious run for the highest elective office in the land, was guilty of a blatant case of insensitivity. His "Hymietown" statement on one of his visits to New York was regrettable. Since then he has apologized to the Jewish community. It is my sense that his apology has been received, and his subsequent actions have erased most lingering negative feelings toward him.

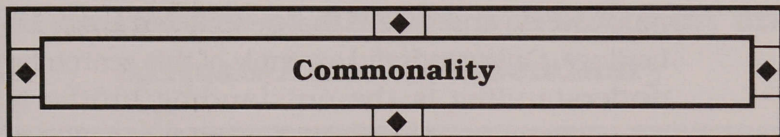
The actions of Israel often lead to claims of insensitivity by people of color around the world. African Americans and others felt that at the height of South Africa's denial of human and civil rights for its Black majority by the Afrikaners, Israel was one of their best trading partners. Israel argued that its economic best interest was at stake. Others felt that it was an insensitive and adverse gesture leading to further bifurcation of African American-Jewish relations.



A third coach on the train that sped through and “jammed us into unconsciousness” was criminality. It appears that New York is the seedbed of criminality by Jews and Blacks toward each other. Equally criminal is the dastardly attack by Jews on Palestinians as they worshiped in Hebron. Then, too, it is criminal for Palestinians to wantonly bomb buses filled with Jewish settlers in the Gaza or launch catooch bombs from Syria into Jewish settlements in Northern Israel, such as occurred during my visit there in October 1994.

What I have tried to do is to identify what happened to rupture our relationships, our collegiality, our coalition. We were struck by a fast-moving train and we are able only now to identify its make, model, engineer and destination. Before anything of lasting value can occur in human relations there must first be a dissection of what went wrong. The party or parties causing the fracture must admit their complicity and seek a solution

It seems to me that those who initiated this Conference deserve the thanks of everyone. What you have done is to reverse the trend of separation and suspicion. You have created a climate and a place where dialogue can occur on friendly grounds. The goal of dialogue is understanding, not consensus; community, nor conformity; enlightenment, not infringement.

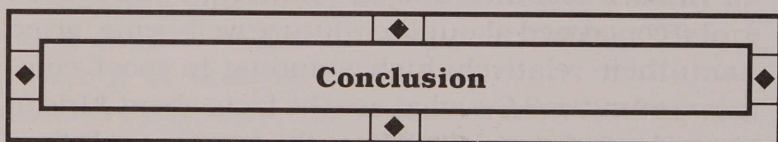


Here, amidst the beauty of this campus, it is possible to determine commonalities:

- The relationship between the holocaust that occurred during the slave-trade passages and that which transpired with Jews in Eastern Europe is clear. Let us call this from Gorée Island to Auschwitz. One of the academic features of such dialogue is to dispel the growing feelings that the holocaust did not actually occur but is a Jewish ploy.
- A second direction in which our future might lead us is to understand some facts about each other. For example, are all Jews rich? Do Jews stick together and act uniformly? Are Jews concerned about their future well-being, given their relatively high standing in most communities? Or, what are the facts about African American mobility? Does the presence of Dillard in New Orleans positively impact the social, political, economic milieu of this city? Do African Americans spend enough time planning their future, or do they just rehearse their past?
- A third commonality we share is our Judaic roots. The formative aspects of Judaism and of Christianity, a religious faith subscribed to by the majority of African Americans, has the Old Testament in common. I am amazed at how

much we do and believe that reflects our common heritage. One wonderful example of this search for understanding is the outstanding brotherly relationship between Walter Kimbrough, pastor of Cascade United Methodist Church, Atlanta, and Rabbi Alvin Sugarman of The Temple, Atlanta. They worship, play, pray and serve together.

- A fourth commonality about which we feel good at ITC, Atlanta, is the periodic sharing of our religion and personal experiences with rabbinical students at four Jewish theological seminaries. We feel that the interaction of these future religious leaders will positively impact the climate in many of our cities. The Shirim Chorale of the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and the Chorus of ITC conducted a joint concert of religious music. It brought tears to my eyes to hear these musical groups sing together “Ose Shalom” and “Hatikvah.”



As I strolled down that tree-lined pathway outside Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, my thoughts were of remembrance. How important it is to remember our past. While not a slave to it, we grope around in the dungeons of an uncertainty if not informed by our past. Memory is cathartic. It is my hope that we will recollect our glorious past, our halcyon days of yore. Recalling them, let us now move to the undreamed, yet conceived future that might be our inheritance. Then, we can identify the train that “mauled and dragged us,” pick up ourselves from the tracks, determine its direction and ride in its “coaches” to our final destination—understanding.