

March 10, 2021

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ISRAEL KASNETT / JNS

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Israeli, Egyptian officials hold largest bilateral conference in 20 years

ARIEL KAHANA / ISRAEL HAYOM

Israeli Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen says the conference will help countries bring bilateral trade back to its previous high of \$1 billion annually.

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COLUMN


REBECCA SUGAR
Black-Jewish dialogue in American needs a reset





If we want our communities to truly partner again, we have to remember what made us partners in the first place—not guilt, not resentment, not the color of our skin and not even oppression.


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(January 20, 2021 / JNS) The Jewish community in America once had a proud history of alliance and partnership with the African-American community. Jews disproportionately engaged in and helped found significant parts of the civil-rights movement and counted African-American leaders among our proudest and most important allies in support of the State of Israel in its infancy. Increasingly over the last decades, the relationship between our communities has clearly fractured, and Jewish communal institutions have either focused somewhat obsessively on its repair or self-flagellated for the many ways in which it declared it hadn’t done enough to repair it. Either way, this broken bond has been a Jewish concern for some time, yet the divide seems to be widening.

Jewish communal organizations have hosted a long list of conversations and events over the years to address the issue. With a few notable exceptions, most of these efforts have been framed within the broken “social justice” narrative that purports to have us “understand” the “other.” We collectively retrace the history of Jewish landlords in Harlem, relaunch accusations of Jews’ “white privilege” and review race riots in Brooklyn, N.Y. Sometimes, we invite Rev. Al Sharpton on stage.

And on and on it goes, this perpetual rearview-mirror review of a now-scripted and entirely limited perspective on the interactions and priorities of two communities trying to engage with one another. Throw in a good dose of identity politics, and this unsatisfying picture is



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complete. Depressingly so. It is a never-ending loop of "you did this, we did that, we owe you, you owe us." These well-intentioned forums have largely turned into stale platforms of grievance-venting, guilt and confession of past sins. They often end with encouragement to return the following month for a Zoom event with the director of interreligious engagement, probably for more of the same. And there you have the dominant approach to black-Jewish dialogue in America.

Is this all that Jews and blacks have to say to one another? Are all blacks and Jews so marinated in the victim/oppressor status model that we are willing to accept this mediocrity dripping in political correctness and call it a way forward? No, this isn't what most blacks and Jews want; it is just what we get. This is the twisted outcome of woke American culture, perpetuated by our organizations whose fundraising incentives haven't encouraged them to change it up. This approach distorts the values of both communities and subjects us to a useless merry-go-round of programming, but little progress.

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Shared values have a greater chance of bringing people together than victimhood and grievance ever will. So many great African-American and Jewish minds have important messages to share with each other and the country that leverage the best of both communities' traditions and histories and move beyond all this. We aren't hearing from them, and we are all being cheated. Luckily, these two communities in the United States have a wealth of shared values to explore.

Self-reliance is one. When society enslaves you or sends you to the gas chambers, and you emerge from those bitter experiences to build a civil-rights movement or a State of Israel, your people have something important to say about the power of self-reliance as a communal and individual tool to rise above unthinkable circumstances. How badly does America need that conversation right now? What about the importance of education? Building universities to accept our children when Harvard wouldn't tell us a great deal about our respective communities' commitment to the value of educating our youth as a means to

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opportunity. How have we succeeded and failed in protecting this value for our next generations, and how can we learn from each other’s experiences. Managing freedom, the centrality of family and religion as a communal anchor are more values we share and are worth a serious examination—not just for our own communities’ benefit, but for all Americans.’

What might the Hoover Institution’s Dr. Shelby Steele and former Harvard Professor Ruth Wisse have to say about some of these topics sitting together on a panel? How would economist Thomas Sowell explore these ideas with Professor Eugene Kontorovich? What might we learn about the role of family in community stability from civil-rights icon Bob Woodward in conversation with Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik? Coming together around big ideas, affirming each other’s contributions, and banding together to elevate everyone through these discussions is the best form of community “bridge-building” I can imagine.

If we want our communities to truly partner again, we have to remember what made us partners in the first place—not guilt, not resentment, not the color of our skin and not even oppression. These are the challenges we each overcame, but they aren’t our defining characteristics. How can we help one another return to our foundational principles? Not *tikkun olam*, not “racial justice”—our actual foundational principles.

Our communities historically believed in great ideas—the sanctity of human life, the nuclear family, education, the American values of equality under the law, hard work and personal responsibility. We both grounded those beliefs in our biblical traditions and demanded more of ourselves than of others. That is how Dr. King’s generation rid us of segregation and how the Jewish people founded a state in the Middle East and unprecedented success in the United States after the Holocaust. And those are the ideas that made us close partners and allies years back. That we stopped talking about the great ideas that bind us—and simultaneously allowed for so many cynical and corrosive ideas to distract and divide us—is the root of the problem.

We need a new framework for black-Jewish engagement. I contend that most African-Americans want to talk about opportunity, renewal, faith, pride and patriotism because they have a strong communal history of these values and know the future is vested in them as well. Leadership for this silent majority is waiting for an invitation to a Jewish forum, waiting to take the conversation in a healthier direction. Who will dial up Shelby Steele first?