

# The relationship of southern jews to blacks and the civil rights movement



## The Relationship of Southern Jews to Blacks and the Civil Rights Movement

Since the 1960's historians and many other scholars have tried to delve into the relationship of blacks and Jews. The experiences of blacks and Jewish people have common histories of dispersion, bondage, persecution, and emancipation. Their relationship can be primarily recognized since the formation of the NAACP in 1909. During the civil rights movement, this organization played a key role in the black-Jewish alliance. However, many scholars have argued if there ever was an alliance between the two, and if so, what might have caused this alliance to break?

We may generalize that today's relationship between the two groups is a relationship in which Jews are superior in regards to social position. In my research I analyzed the works of several scholars to seek the involvement of southern Jews with blacks and the Civil Rights movement. In his 1973 publication of *The Provincials*, Eli Evans argues that the South is one of the least anti-Semitic regions in the Nation. Among their gentile neighbors, Jews had been accepted as white members of Southern society during the civil rights movement.

At this time Jews barely made up one percent of the South's population. Even though a large portion of white civil rights activists were Jewish, the percentage of Jews in the South that took part in the civil rights movement was significantly smaller compared to Jews in the North, because many Southern Jews were afraid to actively support the civil rights movement. For years they maintained the racial status quo among white gentiles by keeping a low profile. If they were to support desegregation they would be risking their own acceptance within the white community.

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Although the majority of southern Jews stayed quiet, some Jews did not mind taking this risk because they believed that segregation was wrong. In recent years the much overlooked relationship of Southern Jews to the Civil Rights movement has been debated. I looked at three main sources that analyze this relationship with varying arguments. These three sources are Clive Webb's *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights*, Berkley Kalin and Mark Bauman's *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, and Murray Friedman's *What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance*.

Clive Webb's *Fight Against Fear* was the first book to analyze black-Jewish relations in the South during the civil rights era. He observes southern Jews' views towards blacks from the Cival War period through the civil rights era and seeks to disprove any kind of political black-Jewish alliance in the southern states by discussing the history between the two. Webb also argues that Southern Jews did not respond to civil rights as a group, and concludes that they were not as "weak and ineffectual in the fight against racial equality" as scholars have made them seem.

Many individual southern Jews were inspired from conviction, which was often credited to their Judaism. He also argues these individuals that took risks are "all the more remarkable given the dangers" facing them. Webb's first chapter is titled "From Slavery to Segregation" which presents a brief review of black-Jewish relations in the South. He mentions that Jews owned and traded slaves, though not in substantial numbers and he notes that some Jews also freed slaves. According to Roy Rosenberg's book on American Jews, "relatively few Jews held slaves.

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In 1830 in the American South, there were only 23 Jews among the 59, 000 slaveholders owning twenty or more slaves, and only 4 Jews among the 11, 000 slaveholders who owned fifty or more slaves. " During the Civil War the majority of southern Jews were loyal Confederates. As Rabbi James Wax of Memphis stated, " Almost all native-born Southerners whose families lived in the South for two or more generations have segregationist attitudes. " This sense of southernism played a role for Jews. Historians have found that older Jews who could trace their roots back to several generations had long since adapted to the South's racial code.

Contrastingly, the younger Jews who had just recently moved to the South tended to be more liberal and less willing to accept these racial customs. 6 The climax of Jewish anti-Semitism took place in 1913 when Jewish factory owner Leo Frank was lynched. Jews responded by forming national defense agencies. They knew they had to keep the racial status quo because of this constant reminder that their acceptance within the white community was uncertain. As the civil-rights movement gathered momentum, Webb notes that blacks expected Jews to help them move forward.

Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly spoke of his disappointment with Southern Jews. Webb argues that the black leadership had " unrealistic expectations of southern Jews" and " underestimated the extreme danger to which they were exposed. " 4 The 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, deemed the principle of " separate but equal" public schools unconstitutional. The risky political status of southern Jews was exposed through this court case which led to a 400 percent increase of anti-Semitism in the South.

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Segregationists accused “ Communist Jews” (due to their labor union ties) of having organized a plan to destroy democracy in the South. These accusations created a large amount of anti-Semitic extremism across the South. However, southern Jews living in cosmopolitan cities did not receive as great amount of anti-Semitism as did those living in small towns. 3 In 1960, *Boynton v. Virginia* had outlawed racial segregation in restaurants and waiting rooms in terminals serving buses that crossed state lines.

This introduced Freedom Riders to the South who were civil rights activists that rode interstate buses into the segregated South to test this Supreme Court decision. These Freedom Riders were sort of a nuisance to the southern Jews, who wished that they would just go back to the North. “ In Birmingham, Rabbi Grafman condemned the freedom riders for upsetting the balance between Jews and their white neighbors. ” Even the southern Jews who were outspoken in regards to segregation did not want them there and believed that their problems would be resolved over time. Webb writes a chapter on Jewish merchants in Atlanta, Birmingham, and Little Rock that is subtitled “ Caught in the Crossfire. ”

In this chapter, Webb further describes the inner turmoil of southern Jews who wanted to support desegregation but feared its impact on their businesses and other facets of their life. In his description, Webb highlights different types of merchants ranging from motel owners to department store owners. An Atlanta motel owner boldly integrated his facilities and Richard Rich, a department store owner, had high demands from blacks but feared the white economic backlash.

Webb also discusses loyal Jewish segregationists, including the Birmingham department store owner who once fired all his black employees and even posed in a Klan outfit. Webb notes that Jewish merchants were rarely unsympathetic to these protestors. Most of these merchants had their focus on economic self-preservation, and they were targeted by black protestors and segregationists alike. Webb argues that “ although relations between the two peoples suffered some slight dislocation, there was no lasting injury.

In 1997 the publication of *The Quiet Voices* introduced a different interpretation that opposed the longstanding depiction of southern Jews as a weak and ineffectual force in the fight for racial equality. “ *Fight Against Fear* seeks to build on the revisionist argument of Bauman and Kalin. It too assumes that the majority of southern Jews were motivated solely by the desire for self-preservation. ” Chapters six, seven, and eight of *Fight Against Fear* begin to part with the interpretations in the *Quiet Voices*. Chapter six focuses on the profiles three of the most infamous southern Jews who publicly supported segregation.

Some Jews joined organizations such as the White Citizen’s Council for self-protection, but this chapter focuses on those Jews who were actually faithful believers of white supremacy. In chapter seven, Webb Offsets his explanation of segregationist southern Jews and examines the role of southern Jewish women during the civil rights movement. He describes how Jewish women took an active role in desegregating public schools such as Little Rock's Central High School and the New Orleans's school system. The last chapter concludes his novel by looking at the contribution of southern rabbis to the civil rights movement.

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He argues that most rabbis were the most active southern Jews in the fight for racial equality. Rabbis of the South rarely engaged in mass protest but rather served to educate their congregations on their religious duties suggesting they support racial equality. Berkley Kalin and Mark Bauman's *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* is a volume of sixteen essays that analyzes the relationships of southern Reformed rabbis to civil rights. These essays are arranged chronologically over the period of segregation, the civil rights, and the time after this era.

As a whole, the essays give insight into a more specific and grounded understanding of what life was like for southern rabbis caught between the caution and conservatism of their congregations and the moral constraints of their faith. Through examining many rabbis across the South, these essayists found a substantial amount of activism than previous scholarship had noted, such as how " Southern rabbis may have spoken in hushed tones, as the title suggests, but speak and act they did, at times with exemplary courage. "

The underlying question in these essays is the same that Webb argues: whether there was an alliance between Jews as a religious-ethnic minority and blacks as a historically defamed racial minority, and if so, did Jews in the South fight white supremacy? One difference in this volume from Webb's work is that these essays help provide a background for understanding the development of Jewish social and political thinking beyond the civil rights period. I believe that Webb's work could have been much stronger and more credible if he had continued to write on Southern Jews until present day if he really wanted to argue against a black-Jewish alliance.

In his introduction, Mark Bauman is careful not to exaggerate the importance of the southern Jewish contribution towards the advancement of civil rights. He describes the difficulty that southern Judaism has had in relation to southern culture and carefully makes sure to overlook ways in which Judaism is different. <sup>11</sup> Three of the volume's essays deal with the time before the civil rights, and the rest focus on the post-WWII civil rights movement. Each essay tells of the history and the problems of black-Jewish relations in the South, the statistical facts, and the struggles of the southern rabbis.

Each essay has a similar story: a struggling spiritual leader who wants to do more but is caught between two different obligations. There are two notable exceptions to this reoccurring story. Hollace Ava Weiner's essay on Rabbi Sidney A. Wolf is seemingly indifferent with the question of whether or not Rabbi Wolf had "done enough" and expresses the experiences of a midwestern Jew coming to Corpus Christi, Texas, and trying to make himself and his ideas about racial and religious tolerance an integral part of life there.

Another exception was in Marc Dollinger's essay "Hamans' and 'Torquemadas': Southern and Northern Jewish Responses to the Civil rights Movement, 1945-1965" which delves further than the question of whether rabbis did enough to analyze the complex relationship between northern and southern Jews during the civil rights movement. <sup>11</sup> Contrary to the other two books I have analyzed, Murray Friedman's *What Went Wrong? : The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* makes an effort to rewrite the history of blacks and Jews and thus believes that there was a black-Jewish alliance at one time.

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However, this alliance has been long broken and his research argues to put to rest such radical accusations by some African-Americans that “ Jews were largely responsible for slavery in America; that they were and are oppressors rather than supporters of the poor black minority; and that they are enemy number one of what remains of the civil rights movement. ” He efficiently disproves such conspiracy supporters such as Khalid Muhammad, Harold Cruse, and David Levering Lewis, who have argued that Jews have tried to manipulate Blacks for their own purposes.

His work proceeds chronologically, providing a solid account of events, anecdotes and conflicts, often differing with revisionist scholars. He notes that the alliance between blacks and Jews was never as strong as it appeared and that problems occurred between the two groups long before the bitter arguments of 1970 over affirmative action and Middle Eastern foreign policy. Friedman as well as many other Jewish leaders is interested in healing the conflict between blacks and Jews.

The first step to his plan is to bring about an awareness of how unselfishly and deeply involved Jews were in the civil rights movement. This book documents how Jews involvement was more extensive than has previously been acknowledged (a similar argument in the Quiet Voices) and how revisionists are now denying these claims. Among other examples he recounts about the large amount of Jews that put their lives on the line for black rights. I didn't examine What Went Wrong as closely as the other two books because it does not focus specifically on southern Jews.

Friedman fails to distinguish between Jews acting as individuals and Jews professing to represent their coreligionists. Also, even though the book is organized chronologically, Friedman jumps around too much to keep the reader with a consistent chronological understanding and does not give a fully developed answer to the question he poses. However, Friedman does a thorough job tracking the origins of the black-Jewish conflict. I will have to admit that the study of black-Jewish relations during the civil rights movement is a much larger topic than I originally believed it to be.

And even though this paper does not reflect the tremendous amount of time I spent on the research, I have ultimately learned that the scholarly work on this topic is highly debated and can be quite ambiguous as a result. All three of the works have contrasting arguments as well as similar viewpoints. One thing that links them all together is a theme that runs through the works: southern Jews seeking acceptance by conforming to the culture and values of the white Christian majority while living in fear of anti-Semitic actions inspired by the Ku Klux Klan.

It can also be concluded that the relationship between the two groups has changed significantly over time. The scholars of this study may not agree with each other over the argument of a political and social black-Jewish alliance ever being created but they do all provide a wealth of useful and thought-provoking material towards the study of Jewish history in the South; and through their work we can gain a deeper appreciation for the study.