

Literature of the Holocaust

The Uncomfortable Relationship African Enslavement in the Common History of Blacks and Jews

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In 1978, I attended a faculty luncheon at the University of Chicago Hillel House, where the distinguished African-American historian, John Hope Franklin, was giving a talk on the Jewish community in the nineteenth-century Southern United States. After the formal presentation, a member of the audience asked a question about Southern Jewish participation in the debate on slavery. As I remember it, Franklin replied that he did not know too much about the subject. I recall very clearly one of the Hillel regulars remarking that since many of the early Southern Jews were Sephardim who had fled Spanish and Portuguese persecution, they must have been sympathetic to the plight of Black slaves.

I remember this statement because it was allowed to pass without comment, although John Hope Franklin and I (we discussed it afterwards) were both aware that Sephardi Jews in the New World had been heavily involved in the African slave trade. Why did two professional historians in a university setting hesitate to provide our colleagues with such an important piece of information? I cannot answer for Franklin but I, as a Jew sitting in a Jewish institution that was entertaining an African-American guest, felt that pointing out the role of Jews in the history of Black slavery would, in this context, have constituted something of a betrayal. I did not want to undermine the sense of solidarity between the two communities which had been reinforced by Franklin's very presence, as well as through his references to our common confrontation with white Gentile Southern bigots.

Franklin and I, in effect, were condoning a benign historical myth: that the shared liberal agenda of twentieth-century Blacks and Jews has a pedigree going back through the entire remembered past. Avodim hayinu! We, the Jews, had also experienced history on the side of the enslaved and always cried out in anguish against the oppression of the enslavers.

For better or worse, it is no longer possible to maintain that this myth has any but the most abstract bearing on the facts of our pre-emancipation relationship with Africans and their New World descendants. Jewish students of Jewish history have known it was untrue and, over several decades, have produced a significant body of scholarship detailing the involvement of our ancestors in the Atlantic slave trade and Pan-American slavery. Until recently, this work remained buried in scholarly journals, read only by other specialists. It had never been synthesized in a publication for a non-scholarly audience. A book of this sort has now appeared, however, written not by Jews but by an anonymous group of African Americans associated with the Reverend Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam.

Since its publication in 1991, *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* has become the

subject of considerable furor, although little serious analysis. It was cited by Professor Leonard Jeffries in his infamous speech in July 1991 at the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival that led to his removal from the chairmanship of the Black Studies Department at the City University of New York. (He was subsequently reinstated as chairman and awarded damages in a suit he brought against the university.) The book was also the topic of an even more publicized and virulently anti-Semitic speech by Farrakhan's representative, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, at Kean College in New Jersey in November 1993.

Early in 1993, a furor arose at Wellesley College when Tony Martin, a Black Studies professor, assigned the book in one of his African-American history courses, causing vociferous protest from Jewish groups. During a long, stormy discussion in Wellesley's Academic Council about the ethics of teaching such a text, Selwyn Cudjoe, the chair of the college's Africana Studies Department, denounced *The Secret Relationship* as anti-Semitic and deplored Martin's uncritical presentation of the text. Martin has subsequently chronicled and defended his and Jeffries's position in two broadside publications, *Blacks and Jews* at Wellesley News (a play on the name of the campus newspaper) and *Blacks and Jews News* (published by the Nation of Islam). Martin has now published a book of his own, *The Jewish Onslaught: Despatches from the Wellesley Battlefield*, which elicited a public denunciation by Wellesley's president. Martin has also announced the imminent publication of Volumes II and III of *The Secret Relationship*. Among Martin's arguments in support of *The Secret Relationship*, there is at least one which Jewish intellectuals need to take seriously: that few of the Jewish leaders who have attacked the book have actually read it. Martin is apparently unaware (as, it appears, are many Jewish critics) of a carefully researched, if somewhat polemical, report on the book by Harold Brackman published in 1992 under the auspices of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, titled *Farrakhan's Reign of Historical Error: the Truth Behind the Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*. Indeed, the fact that the present article is appearing more than two years after the publication of *The Secret Relationship* in a journal very much concerned with Black-Jewish relations itself requires some explanation.

One can understand the hesitation of Jews to buy *The Secret Relationship* and thus put \$19.95 (plus \$3 for shipping and handling) into the coffers of an organization notorious for its anti-Semitic pronouncements (I bought my copy in a Black bookstore in Chicago which also sells such classic anti-Semitic tracts as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Henry Ford's *The International Jew*). *The Secret Relationship*'s association with the rantings of Leonard Jeffries, and its denunciation in a *New York Times* open piece on Black anti-Semitism by the very prominent and widely respected African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have made it easier for Jewish critics to dispense with examining the book themselves.

But none of these facts really excuses Jews from the obligation of opening up this notorious tome and seeing what is actually inside it. We might even be somewhat comforted if we never go past the prefatory "Editor's Note":

This study is structured as a presentation of historical evidence regarding the relationship of one people with another. The facts, as established by highly respected scholars of the Jewish community [emphasis added] are here established and linked by as sparse a narrative as is journalistically permitted for review by those interested in the subject... Those who would use this material as a basis for the violation of the human rights of another are abusing the knowledge herein. The wise will benefit to see this as an opportunity to develop a more equitable relationship between the families of man.

The text which follows remains faithful to at least one of the goals set out here. It relies for its

information almost entirely upon Jewish scholarship most, but not all, of it quite respectable and extremely little falling into the category which a "Note on Sources" proscribes as "anti-Semitic and/or anti-Jewish." (Brackman, in his study of *The Secret Relationship*, notes a number of references to three authors hostile to Jews-Frederick Law Olmsted, Werner Sombart, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky-but these play a very minor role in a book with 1,275 footnotes.) The easy accessibility of such material of course contradicts the assertion of the book's title, that Jewish participation in the slave trade was hitherto a secret. Nonetheless the contents of this book will come as a surprise to many-perhaps most readers for reasons already discussed.

The anti-Semitic character of *The Secret Relationship* emerges not from its substantive content-which seems fairly accurate-or even the aura of conspiracy conveyed by its title. It comes out rather in the tone of the narrative, which binds together the sources and fosters, without any evidence, a stereotype of Jews as a uniquely greedy and untrustworthy population. Brackman treats the content of the book as a series of "Big Lies" but, as the details of his well-documented critique indicate, distortions are produced almost entirely by selective citation rather than explicit falsehood. Sometimes the attack is simply appended to the story of the slave trade by the authors/editors, as in the opening paragraph, which links "the blanket expulsion of Jews from so many places around the world" to charges of "economic exploitation of Gentile communities."

More frequently, there are innuendoes imbedded in the accounts of Jewish involvement in the slave trade which "incited the moral indignation of Europe's Gentile population." Jews in the slave-trading Dutch West India Company "remained internationalists without the patriotic fervor of their Gentile countrymen." In the British West Indies, Jews who owned no plantations and relatively few slaves and were excluded from public office are presented (through local government pleas to place a special tax upon them) as enjoying "civic advantages Here as elsewhere the text revels in citations of anti-Jewish charges from historical documents but then, when discussing the failure of Jews to play a significant role in the United States abolitionist movement (a truth which very directly undermines the "benign myth"), insists that fear of persecution could have nothing to do with this reticence since Jews were, even before 1860, better off in America than they had ever been in any Diaspora situation.

Along with African enslavement, Jews are given special blame here (again with little evidence or logic) for many other crimes of European expansion, beginning with the voyages of Columbus (the authors manage to cover their insinuations with some acknowledgment of scholarly doubts by heading a sub-chapter "Columbus the Slave-dealing Jew?"), the selling of poisoned blankets to North American Indians by a British general, loyalist opposition to the American Revolution, the opium trade to China, the operations of the New Orleans pirate Jean Lafitte, and even the conversion of slaves in colonial Georgia to Christianity "to pacify and subdue the Black African."

Unpleasant as this book is to read (although occasionally long quotes from the Jewish sources are used to offset the authors' own voices) it does raise a serious historical question: How significant were the Jews in the slave trade? The authors' primary method, for which they have been attacked by Gates and Brackman, is the crude use of statistics. Thus Jews are said to have "used kidnapped Black Africans disproportionately more than any other ethnic or religious group in New World history." This may possibly be true, since there were not very many Jews in the Americas between 1492 and the 1860s, and quite a few had been involved in the slave trade. The authors do not undertake any systematic count or comparison with other groups (e.g., Portuguese, Scots, Huguenots), however, and in any case such a statistic does not have much meaning. The vast majority of New World slaves were captured, bought, traded, and forced into labor by non-Jews. Nor is there much analytic (as opposed to polemical) sense in the book's

various counts of slaves owned by Jews and the alphabetical list, occupying the last 100 pages, of various Jews or Jewish families known to have been associated with slavery.

None of this data is placed in any context which „would indicate its statistical, not to say broader historical, significance. As the authors correctly note, the role in the slave trade of Gentile Europeans, Muslims, and even African "tribal traitors" has been studied more extensively than that of the Jews. But the team responsible for *The Secret Relationship* does not seem to have examined much of this vast literature and misreads some of that which they do use (on pp. 177-78, they inaccurately cite historian Philip Curtin's statistics on the trade and ignore entirely the debate on this issue among various American, European, and African scholars).

In fact, because of their poor grasp of the historical economy of slavery, the authors underestimate the structural, as opposed to statistical, importance of the Jews in the early stages of the New World slave trade. Rather than toying with the rumors of Columbus's "secret" identity, the book might better have focused on the coincidence of the Jewish expulsion from Spain with the establishment of triangular links between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. As a result of this situation, the Sephardim found themselves dispersed over the critical nodes of the new system, especially Amsterdam and Brazil. It was not the material wealth of the Jews that made them so crucial to this emerging South Atlantic economy but rather (as with other ethnic-commercial diasporas such as the Huguenots, the Quakers, the overseas Chinese, Muslims in Africa) their ability to transfer assets and information among themselves across the entire economic network.

As even this book notes, Jews owned a small minority of shares in the Dutch West India Company (an unsuccessful commercial enterprise in any case). Their value to the Dutch lay instead in the fact that many of them, seeking to escape the Iberian Inquisition, had migrated to Brazil where they helped found the first major New World sugar plantations. When the Dutch first conquered northern Brazil from Portugal and were in turn driven out by a Portuguese reconquest, most local Jews left with them to disseminate the sugar production system to the Dutch and later British Islands. The only places where Jews really came close to dominating a New World plantation system were the Dutch colonies of Curacao and Surinam (the language of the escaped slave communities in the Surinam interior still refers to prohibited foods as "mi trefu").

But the Dutch territories were small, and their importance was shortlived. By the time the slave trade and European sugar-growing reached its peak in the 1700s, Jewish participation was dwarfed by the enterprise of British and French planters who did not allow Jews among their number. During the nineteenth century, Jews owned some cotton plantations in the southern United States but not in any meaningful numbers. (*The Secret Relationship*, to its credit, is not the basis for Farrakhan's recent statement that three-quarters of all southern slaves belonged to Jews.) Jews of Portuguese Brazilian origin did play a significant (but by no means dominant) role in the eighteenth-century slave trade of Rhode Island, but this sector accounted for only a very tiny portion of the total human exports from Africa.

For all its shortcomings, *The Secret Relationship* does force us to confront the history which John Hope Franklin and I avoided discussing publicly in 1978. The fact that our forefathers were generally, and at times quite significantly, on the side of the slavers in the cruel world of the Atlantic economy may also help call into question the whole image of Diaspora Jews as "victims" in medieval-to-modern world history. Indeed, some of the very terms associated with this status, such as "Diaspore," "ghetto," and, in several chapter headings of *The Secret Relationship*, "Holocaust," have been appropriated by African Americans to define a trajectory of

suffering which ultimately has placed them in a far more disadvantaged position than that of Jews.

One response to such a new understanding of our history is to take the path of neoconservatism, identifying with the white Gentile establishment and perceiving all proponents of "Third Worldism" (including militant African Americans) as our enemies. The rhetoric of The Secret Relationship along with the use made of it by Professors Jeffries and Martin certainly encourages such a move on the part of Jews. The book—to say nothing of Khalid Abdul Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan's gratuitous fantasies about Jewish crimes against Blacks—may indeed have been intended, despite its opening disclaimers, to push African Americans into the same kind of polarization. Looking at the examples of the former Yugoslavia and extremist groups on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict, one might easily conclude that the memorialization of past sufferings must inevitably stoke the fires of contemporary hate. Even a historian is thus tempted to prefer forgetfulness or the comfort of benign myths.

We Jews, however, even liberal ones, who justifiably insist that the history of the Nazi Holocaust not be denied, can hardly urge African Americans to suppress the record of the slave trade and the involvement of our own ancestors in it. It also does not help to accompany all discussions of Jewish slave trading with indictments of Christians and Arab Muslims as the true villains of the African slave trade. (Brackman, for example, provides a somewhat lurid catalogue of 'Arab slave raids' using, among other sources, my own research. In fact, the Muslim or Oriental slave trade out of Africa involved mainly Berber, Swahili, and other Black African raiders and merchants rather than Arabs.) Thus while we should not ignore the anti-Semitism of The Secret Relationship (limited at least to accusations of avarice rather than blood libels or plots to rule the world), we must recognize the legitimacy of the stated aim of examining fully and directly even the most uncomfortable elements in our common past. There are certainly better ways than those of this book, from both a scholarly and moral perspective, to carry out such an examination. But carried out it must be, not to apportion or remove guilt but rather to learn who we are through what we were and to incorporate this knowledge into the struggle to become something better.