CHOSEN FOR WHAT?: LIBERAL-JEWISH CRISIS IN THE WAKE OF BLACK POWER

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ABSTRACT

Despite years of research and hundreds of scholarly works that has been completed examining the relationship between the Black and American Jewish communities, relatively little has been done on mapping how internal discussions in the Jewish community changed as Civil Rights transformed. Many researchers have discussed Black and Jewish relations in terms of their ebbs and flows, i.e. when these two groups worked together and when they butted heads. However, while the research here tracks some changes in the Black-Jewish relationship, it locates itself primarily within the Jewish community rather than outside it.

By examining the writings of liberal, politically active Jews in the mid-to-late 1960s, this work presents the ways in which, arguably the most important shift in the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence and dominance of Black Power, led to changes in Jewish understanding of the middle-class and American “whiteness.” These writings, particularly those of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and Washington, D.C. area rabbi, Stanley Rabinowitz, show that Black Power ideology deeply affected the way liberal Jews felt about their place in white America. Black Power ideology, specifically, Black Power’s notions concerning assimilation, the middle-class, and coalition building, caused liberal, politically active Jews to reevaluate their own whiteness, altering their perceived place in both the Civil Rights Movement specifically and American society generally.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Senior Rabbi Gil Steinlauf of Adas Israel, a local D.C. Temple founded in 1876, published an editorial in the Washington Post with the following headline: “Jews Struggled for Decades to Become White. Now We Must Give Up White Privilege to Fight Racism.”\(^1\) The title and the text of Steinlauf’s op-ed were remarkable; focusing on the rising tide of extra-judicial police killings of Black people across the country and the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, Rabbi Steinlauf offered the following advice:

We must cease to consider ourselves to be part of the social construct of whiteness, despite all the white privilege that America affords us, privilege that eluded many of our parents and grandparents. Starting in this new year . . . we must teach our children that we are, in fact, not white, but simply Jewish.\(^2\)

Here Steinlauf summarizes the two key aspects of his argument to his readers: first, that whiteness is a social construct which affords privilege to those who fall within its definition; and second, that Jews had worked to join the social construct of whiteness but must now realize that they are not white and work to rid themselves of their adopted white privilege if they are to support the fight against racism.\(^3\)

It is important to note however that while Rabbi Steinlauf’s assertion was both an important and an informative one discussing the place of Jews in America, close to fifty years earlier another Jewish man came to a similar conclusion as Stienlauf. That man was Adas Israel

\(^1\) The article itself was not originally written as an op-ed, rather, Rabbi Steinlauf had adopted it from a sermon he gave to his congregation on the Jewish New Year and high holy day, Rosh Hashanna. See Gil Steinlauf, “Jews struggled for decades to become white. Now we must give up white privilege to fight racism,” \textit{The Washington Post}, September 22, 2015, accessed May 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/09/22/jews-in-america-struggled-for-generations-to-become-white-now-we-must-give-up-that-privilege-to-fight-racism/?utm_term=.7e38710727fd.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
Rabbi from 1960 to 1986, Stanley Rabinowitz. Just as recent racial unrest and the growth of a new ideology and movement found in Black Lives Matter and its sister organizations spurred Rabbi Steinlauf to write his sermon in 2015, a similar change in racial discourse took place in the mid and late 1960s that profoundly affected Steinlauf’s predecessor, Rabbi Rabinowitz: the Black Power Movement.

For Black liberation activists, the Black Power Movement marked the start of a new form of racial consciousness grounded in elements of militarism and radicalism, reshaping the respectability politics and non-violent resistance that characterized the King Civil Rights era. Black Power built itself upon the ideals of armed resistance exemplified by the Black Panther Party that, in direct opposition to the nonviolent and civil disobedience protest model used in the traditional Civil Rights Movement, “came to see self-defense as a full-fledged strategy that was deemed a realistic alternative to nonviolence.” This, according to Simon Wendt, was more than just a key difference between nonviolence and Black Power, but held “conspicuous differences” between simple self-defense during a protest and the active militancy called for by Black Power.

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7 Ibid., 146.
As a result, this led to radical change in the ways that Black Americans conducted civil rights activity across the nation and challenged the effectiveness of nonviolence ideals.\(^8\)

Rather than focus solely on this change in Black America however, the research presented in this thesis will center on the ways in which Black Power ideology had unintended consequences on the ways liberal Jewish Americans involved in the Civil Rights Movement identified. Specifically, this work will argue that Black Power’s ideology concerning assimilation, the middle-class, and coalitions created tensions within the liberal Jewish community over their identity as members of white America and caused these Jews to reassess their racial identity.

To understand the tension brought about by Black Power it is necessary to understand the rich history of Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Jewish roots in the Civil Rights Movement stem as far back as 1909 and the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization in which two Jews previously served as president and whose legal committee was largely made up of Jews through the 1930s.\(^9\) As the struggle for Black rights moved from legal action spearheaded by the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund\(^10\) to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) headed boycotts, marches, and protests, Jews

\(^8\) Ibid., 145-165.


continued to be disproportionately represented compared to other American communities.\(^{11}\) The famous image of Rabbi Abraham Heschel walking side-by-side with Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1965 march from Selma to Birmingham, Alabama,\(^{12}\) and the deaths of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner (along with Black activist James Chaney) during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer\(^{13}\) have oft served as reminders of the “golden age” between Blacks and Jews during the Civil Rights Movement.\(^{14}\) And while the reasons behind the eventual downfall of this alliance have been widely debated and discussed, little attention has been paid to the ways Black Power ideology affected Jews, not in their relationship to their Black counterparts, but amongst themselves in their continual struggle for assimilation and survival in America.

Thus, my thesis will argue that the Black Power Movement and its ideology created a crisis of identity among liberal Jews active in the Civil Rights Movement as they were forced to reconsider what it meant to be categorized as “white” Americans. It is my hope that this thesis will help to generate new knowledge on the ways in which changes in racial discourse affect American communities and therefore contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Jewish identity formation in America.

_Literature Review_

Much scholarly work has been done on Black Power and Jewish liberalism in a variety of subject areas from traditional academic study to the creation of literature and poems on the


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 211.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 2.
historic, and often contemptuous, relationship between Blacks and Jews. However, for purposes of this thesis, research into scholarly works concerning the history of Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, intra-Jewish political dialogue, and what caused the Civil Rights alliance between Blacks and Jews to fail, was the most essential. To that end my research began with my collegiate work in the course “Blacks and Jews in America” taught by Georgetown University Theology and Government professor, Terrence Johnson. Through my academic studies I held an elementary understanding of American racial history and the Black Power Movement and continued to broaden my understanding through reading the works of writers and thinkers such as Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, Terrence Johnson, Keith P. Feldman, and others.

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17 Keith P. Feldman, Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

18 This included examining the PBS Documentary Eyes on the Prize, specifically the two episodes entitled, “Bridge to Freedom, 1965” and “The Time Has Come, 1964-1966.” This documentary helped me to place my research into its historical context, specifically learning of the first use of the term “Black Power” during the March Against Fear in 1966 and its gradual integration into the American vernacular. However, Eyes on the Prize served as only an entry point into larger research on the Black Power Movement and the ideological shifts it created in civil rights discourse. See “Bridge to Freedom 1965” and “The Time Has Come 1964-1966,” Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985, aired 1994, on PBS, http://proxy.library.georgetown.edu/login?url=http://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=103525 &xtid=58637.
Before investigating the Black Power Movement it was crucial to understand some of the foundational political philosophy behind racial discourse in America. For this reason I studied the work of political philosopher Charles Mills and his seminal book *The Racial Contract*. In *The Racial Contract*, Mills argues that white supremacy, and the racism it creates, operates as a political system with “... formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties.” Mills also makes clear that this political system is simply a form of the social contract which he names the Racial Contract. Mill asserts that if the social contract “... is a theory that founds government on the popular consent of individuals taken as equals[,]” the Racial Contract is a “conceptual bridge” that the white power structure has set up in order to control and colonize the nonwhite world. Importantly, Mills argues that the Racial Contract marks those who are white as “full persons,” while those who are nonwhite are “of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities.”

This distinction is critical to understand the nature of the relationship between Blacks and Jews. Mills clearly demarcates Black people as having been given the status of nonwhite and

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20 Ibid., 3.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 4.

24 Ibid., 11.
therefore subhuman, along with Native Americans, and other colonized peoples. 25 Jews on the other hand, Mills argues, are more complicated because, “...the Racial Contract evolves not merely by altering the relations between whites and nonwhites but by shifting the criteria for who counts as white and nonwhite.” 26 In this way, the racial contract allows for the “whitening” of nonwhite groups so that they are able to enter into the white power structure and benefit from the Racial Contract. As a result Mills argues that there exists a third category of Europeans he denotes as “white people with a question mark. . .”, 27 and includes in this third category Irish, Slavs, and, importantly, Jews. 28 This racial demarcation was crucial to my project, illuminating the notion that due to the mark of inferiority placed upon their skin, Black people will never be able to join the “human” side of the Racial Contract, unlike Jews who can and, in fact, did. To be clear, Mills does not go so far as to state that Jews fully joined the white power structure, however I will argue otherwise and provide evidence which supports the notion that Jews did in fact become white in the eyes of Mills’ Racial Contract.

After examining the Racial Contract, the bulk of my secondary research concerned the fundamentals of Black Power. To that end I relied heavily on The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era, an anthology of essays edited by Peniel R. Joseph. 29 The stated purpose of Joseph’s work is to understand the complexity of the Black

25 Ibid., 4.

26 Ibid., 78. Italics in original.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 78-79.

Power Era and explore the figures who gave Black Power its purpose and meaning.\textsuperscript{30}

Additionally, Joseph argues that \textit{The Black Power Movement} attempts to reexamine Black Power from its condemned status as the destroyer of the Civil Rights Movement to, what the anthology argues, is its rightful place as an alternative to the slow and ineffective progress made by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{31} In doing so, \textit{The Black Power Movement} helps not only to create “. . . A Historiography of the Black Power Movement,”\textsuperscript{32} but unearths and discusses a plethora of information concerning Black Power which helps its readers gain a holistic view of the movement and its ideology. As a result of both the breadth and depth of the essays included in \textit{The Black Power Movement}, the work became a cornerstone of my understanding of Black Power outside of the mythical status it had taken on in most civil rights discussions.

To understand the decline of the Civil Rights Movement and the role the relationship between Blacks and Jews may have played, I turned to Trinity College professor Cheryl Lynn Greenberg’s \textit{Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century}.\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{Troubling the Waters}, Greenburg attempts to look behind the curtain of the “golden age” of Black-Jewish relations before its downfall in the late ‘60s and ‘70s.\textsuperscript{34} Greenberg’s work maps Black-Jewish relations from the American Revolution through the turn of the 21st Century, discussing key chapters in the relationship and presenting a larger examination of American


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 1-25.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{33} Greenberg, \textit{Troubling the Waters}.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 1.
liberalism.\textsuperscript{35} While Greenberg does dedicate a subsection of her chapter “Things Fall Apart” to Black Power,\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Troubling the Waters} serves as a much more expansive piece of scholarly work than my project. In addition, while much of Greenberg’s work does draw upon the writings of different Jewish and Black organizations that were involved in the Civil Rights Movement, she focuses primarily on the overall trajectory of the alliance, not any specific movement. Thus, while Greenberg’s work presents an important road map to understanding the political relationship between Blacks and Jews, it helped me to realize that my work would benefit by narrowing the focus from the inter-political dialogue between Blacks and Jews to the the intra-dialogue of Jews alone.

Finally, for secondary research into intra-Jewish political dialogue I studied English professor at the Weissmen School of Arts & Sciences Michael Staub’s \textit{Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America}. In \textit{Torn at the Roots}, Staub argues that there were multiple conflicts that took place within the American Jewish community as liberals and conservatives struggled to understand their place in America in the mists of learning the horrors of the Holocaust, growing social upheaval over Civil Rights and the Vietnam War, and political discourse concerning Israel.\textsuperscript{37} Staub notes early on in his book that, “Jews, it is said, retained their attachments to liberal values, projects, and policies long past the point when it was no longer to their immediate benefit to do so.”\textsuperscript{38} Staub goes on to say however, that what gets lost in this belief is the fact that debate over Jewish liberalism and the Jewish role in social justice

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 1-14

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 217-223.

\textsuperscript{37} Staub, \textit{Torn at the Roots}, 1-11.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 5.
issues goes back decades and is often overlooked. What results is a book in which Staub analyzes specific events and debates that were taking places across America and contextualizes them within Judaism, writing on how Jews argued and fought over meaning, theology, and the Jewish person’s role in American social issues. Within this larger conversation on intra-Jewish politics Staub often touches upon conversations around Civil Rights. However, as with Greenberg, Staub’s project is vast, attempting to discuss changing Jewish political identities over decades rather than the intimate details and writings concerning Black Power alone. As a result, while *Torn at the Roots* serves as a guide for years of intra-Jewish political dialogue, my project narrows the focus and examines how one particular movement caused change in the liberal Jewish community.

Although the sources discussed here in no way represent the entirety of scholarship on the relationship between Blacks and Jews, these works establish a concrete foundation for any research in the subject area. Thus, by using these sources as introductory tools, my work builds upon and expands research on the specific relationship between the Black Power Movement and Jewish Liberalism, and the more general effects of shifts in racial discourse on American communities.

*Methodological Reflections*

The original goal of my research was to place three primary sources in conversation with one another in an effort to uncover any changes in the way the Black-Jewish Alliance, Civil Rights, and the responsibility of Jews in social justice issues was being discussed amongst Jews in response to the Black Power Movement. I intended to do this because I saw an apparent lack

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39 Ibid., 5-7.

40 Ibid., 5.
of scholarly work done on how Black Power shifted racial identity within outside communities.

Thus, I began my research with the following research question:

Through placing the writings of Abraham Heschel, the American Jewish Congress, and Rabbis in the Washington, DC area in conversation, in what ways did the Black Power Movement affect intra-Jewish political dialogue concerning the black-Jewish relationship between Black Power’s first usage in 1965 and the Israeli Six Day War in 1967?

During my investigation, I discovered that liberal, politically active Jews were deeply affected by the Black Power Movement, however my research question was revised to better encapsulate my research findings to the following:

Through placing the writings of the American Jewish Congress, Jewish organizations in the Washington, DC area, and Abraham Heschel in conversation, in what ways did the Black Power Movement and its ideology affect intra-Jewish political dialogue concerning the Civil Rights Movement between 1963 and 1969?

In the following discussion of my methodology, I will explain the ways in which my research helped me to formulate my conclusions and the findings which caused me to reformulate my research question.

The bulk of my primary research consisted of archival work with the Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers at the Rubenstein Library at Duke University, Records of the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) housed by the American Jewish Historical Society in New York City, New York, and the archive housed by the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington. Both the Rubenstein Library and American Jewish Historical Society maintain extensive websites detailing their holdings and the organization of the boxes at their respective locations. In both cases, I examined every listing on these websites to find and make note of any documents pertaining to race, race relations, Civil Rights, Civil Rights figures, or Black Power. Initially, I looked only for documents written between 1965 and 1967, as this appeared as an acceptable enough date range for the type of undergraduate research I was undertaking. However, I quickly
realized that these dates were too restrictive. On the front end, this window did not allow enough time to include extensive discussions on the Civil Rights Movement, and on the black end, failed to provide enough time for the individuals and organizations I was researching to become aware of, grapple with, and form opinions on Black Power ideology. Therefore, I expanded my dates from 1963 through 1969 to further broaden the scope of my research. From here, the experiences at these three archives varied greatly.

The Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers at the Rubenstein Library at Duke University are organized online by subject type and include the boxes and folders that can be found under that subject area, as well as a brief description of the documents found in that box and folder, listed as well. The excess of materials the Heschel Papers had available blew me away, and spent hours combing through document descriptions. After identifying which folders would be most pertinent to my research, I contacted an independent researcher at Duke and requested the boxes for viewing. I then spent an afternoon on the phone with the researcher as she went through each requested folder, described each document within the folders, and then scanned and emailed the documents that I thought to be most necessary. After receiving the documents, I followed three specific steps in my analytical process. First, I read the documents without taking notes in order to fully engage and absorb the material. Second, I went back through the documents, identifying its key arguments, and noting the ways I felt the document might contribute to my work. Third, I read the document a third time to mark any evidence or quotes that spoke to the conclusions I was formulating.

Before I began my work with the Heschel Papers I assumed that I would find two things: documents written between 1963 and 1965—be they speeches, letters, or sermons—which spoke to Heschel’s feelings about the Civil Rights Movement, and documents written between 1965 and
1969 that would show a change in his thoughts on civil rights, possibly reflecting the impact of
the Black Power Movement. Unfortunately, only the former turned out to be the case. Within the
documents I received, I found a few in which Heschel clearly expressed his feelings about the
Civil Rights Movement, the duty of Jews to participate in this movement, and the incompatibility
of religion and racism.\(^\text{41}\) However, of the documents I examined, I found no change in Heschel’s
writing concerning the Jewish role in the Civil Rights Movement over the relevant time period.
This discovery had two effects on my research: first, I came to the conclusion that I had a strong
example of what a liberal, politically active Jew might have thought about the Civil Rights
Movement and their role in it before the Black Power Movement, but that I could not rely upon
Heschel’s writings to shed any light on the effect Black Power had on these thoughts. Second, I
realized that I would have to lean much more heavily on my work with the AJCongress archive
and the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington archive than originally anticipated to
answer my research question.\(^\text{42}\)

My next portion of research was done with the American Jewish Historical Society in
New York. Unlike the Heschel Papers, The American Jewish Historical Society only lists the
box number, folder number, and title of the documents that they house in the Records of the

\(^{41}\) Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel, “The Religious Basis of Equality of Opportunity,” January 14,
1963, box 47, folder 1, Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers, Rubenstein Library Duke University.

\(^{42}\) It is important to note that there is something to be said about there being a lack of documents
on Black Power in this archive. Rabbi Heschel was clearly a man who would have been in tune with
changes in the Civil Rights Movement; he worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr., and did speak on
civil rights in documents I uncovered, see Susannah Heschel, “Their Feet Were Praying: Remembering
the inspiration Heschel and King Drew from each other,” The New York Jewish Week, January 10, 2012,
accessed April 17, 2017, http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/their-feet-were-praying/, and Heschel, “The
Religious Basis of Equality of Opportunity.” The lack of writings on Black Power might have been
intentional on the part of Heschel, whether that be due to his disagreement with Black Power or him not
feeling it an important enough issue to discuss. Regardless, I am hesitant to read too much into this lack
of information as I was unable to visit the archive myself and have no way of knowing at this time if there
is truly nothing in the material on this subject matter. Therefore, further research into the issue is needed
before making any definitive conclusions on Heschel’s thoughts towards the Black Power Movement.
American Jewish Congress. I found that many of the documents I thought would be helpful—based on their date and title—were held in the same boxes. Thus, I requested that the archive pull five boxes for me and I arranged to view them in New York. I spent hours skimming each document in the five boxes to which I had access and taking pictures of the documents I thought would be pertinent to my research. I left with pictures of close to two hundred documents including speeches, meeting minutes, memorandum, and organization resolutions. Following the same process as with the Heschel Papers, I read and analyzed each document, taking notes and extracting relevant quotations. These documents were by far the most crucial sources I found during my research. By comparing AJC sources from 1963 to 1969 concerning Civil Rights, I was able to uncover changes over time in the organization’s internal dialogue. This enabled me to find clear indications of Black Power ideology affecting the ways in which AJCongress members were approaching civil rights, helping me formulate answers to my research question.

Finally, I wanted to examine the archives of a Washington, D.C. area temple in order to find any records of sermons or other documents that referenced Civil Rights or Black Power. Because both Heschel and AJCongress members were directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement, I thought it was important to include the voice of those Jews who may not have been directly involved, but were viewing these societal and political changes from a lay perspective. For this purpose I visited the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington. An archivist there provided me with boxes she thought might be helpful in my research and I was able to uncover dozens of sermons given by Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz of the Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C. concerning race and race relations. Again, following the same process, I analyzed these sources and worked on comparing them to my previous research with the Heschel Papers and AJCongress Archive. After analyzing these papers it became clear, that I had
stumbled upon a source that would be crucial in my arguments and conclusion. Thus, rather than serving as merely anecdotal evidence to support the Heschel and AJCongress material, Rabbi Rabinowtiz’s writings became central to my research and serves as a cornerstone for this thesis.

Through my examination of these three sources I was able to see concrete ways in which the Civil Rights Movement affected liberal Jews active in the Civil Rights Movement. Questions of race, identity, class, and power appeared throughout these sources, revealing Jews grappling with the meaning of Black Power. Each document I read made these questions more apparent, and eventually led me to conclude that, not only did Black Power profoundly alter the Civil Rights Movement, but it caused many liberal Jewish Americans to reexamine their place in white America.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into three chapters with subsections located within each. The first chapter serves as a background on Jewish activity in the Civil Rights Movement and a general description of Black Power ideology. In this chapter I explore both the theoretical and practical reasons behind Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in order for the reader to gain a better understanding of the deep involvement of liberal Jews in the Civil Rights Movement by the mid to late 1960s. I then go on to describe three aspects of Black Power ideology: Black Power’s views on assimilation, the middle-class, and the use of coalitions in social justice work. While these three aspects of Black Power in no way make up the entirety of Black Power ideology, they are the most crucial aspects of Black Power with which readers require a familiarity in order to understand the ways in which Black Power created a Jewish identity crisis. Two subsections, Jews in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power ideology, therefore serve as necessary background knowledge for the reader to understand the arch of my thesis and the
ways in which Black Power altered liberal Jewish notions of what it meant to be white Americans.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on Black Power rhetoric concerning assimilation and the resulting Jewish response. Building upon the knowledge produced in chapter one, this chapter outlines the debate in Jewish American communities surrounding the role of assimilation as a tool for survival in America. I will then present primary evidence to demonstrate that, by the late 1960s and the start of the Black Power Movement, liberal Jewish Americans had assimilated into the white American power structure. Now commonly considered white, I will explore the ways in which Black Power’s anti-assimilation rhetoric played upon the already existing debate in the Jewish American community surrounding assimilation to create a two-part response. I will argue that Jews, such as those involved in the American Jewish Congress, first rejected Black Power’s stance on assimilation into white America before accepting Black Power’s assertions and reassessing their whiteness.

The third chapter of my thesis will focus on the middle-class and coalitions. I note in this chapter that, even before the introduction of Black Power into civil rights discourse, liberal Jewish leaders were already condemning the entrance of Jews into the middle-class as creating complacency towards civil rights work. This already acknowledged disapproval of the middle-class by Jews, in connection with Black Power’s condemnation of this growing social and economic class, created one of the few points of agreement between liberal Jews and Black Power adherents. However, the agreement over questioning middle-class values in order to work for equal rights for Blacks will be revealed to be in contention with Jewish and Black Power thought on inter-community coalitions. This chapter will explain that, while Black Power
rhetoric labeled coalitions as myth, liberal Jews felt morally and religiously obligated to work on civil rights, ignoring calls by many young Black leaders to remove themselves from the struggle.

In the conclusion, I will summarize the arguments made in the body of the work while noting areas of further research necessary to continue the scholarship begun with this thesis. I will also comment on the status of Jewish racial identity in 2017 and the reasons why the issues discussed here have not been resolved in the 50 years since Black Power’s first usage. Thus, the conclusion, in addition to this introduction and three body chapters, will illuminate the ways in which Black Power created a crisis of identity among liberal Jews in the Civil Rights Movement, a crisis which has far-reaching implications into the modern day.
Chapter I: Background

In order to understand how Black Power created a crisis for liberal, political active Jews, it is crucial to understand the theoretical and practical reasons Jews were deeply entrenched in the Civil Rights Movement and the basic tenets of Black Power’s stance on assimilation, the middle-class, and coalitions. This chapter serves to explain those two points, thereby providing the necessary framework as to why Jews questioned their whiteness in the face of Black Power.

Jews and Black Civil Rights

Only ten days before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to Jewish clergy at the Rabbinical Assembly where Rabbi Abraham Heschel introduced him. According to Heschel’s daughter, Susannah, as Dr. King entered the room he was greeted by the rabbis singing “We Shall Overcome” in Hebrew, and Rabbi Heschel’s introduction describing King as “... a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America.” While such a connection between Jewish leaders and Dr. King may come as a surprise to some, this moment speaks tellingly of the intimate relationship Jews had to the Black Civil Rights Movement.

From as early as 1909 and the founding of the NAACP, the Civil Rights Movement was replete with Jewish participation. However, while the fact that Jews participated in civil rights is well established, debate still remains as to why Jews became so involved. One answer to this

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45 Staub, Torn at the Roots, 25.
question lays in Jewish ideological thinking and practical reasoning that together led to Jewish civil rights work. Both of these reasons will be considered here in conjunction with one another.

According to Anna Isaacs of *Moment* magazine, the bond that tied Jews and Blacks together during the mid-twentieth century specifically had, “. . . roots in the themes of liberation and self-determination found in the Exodus story.” The notion of Jews and Blacks sharing religious and moral beliefs founded in the Exodus story of the Israelites fleeing slavery is intriguing as this narrative serves as a key motif in both modern Judaism and the Black Church. University of Puget Sound professor Judith Kay writes on this subject in her essay “The Exodus and Racism: Paradoxes for Jewish Liberation,” and points out that Negro spirituals from slavery are full of references to the Exodus. According to Kay, the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt helped to remind slaves of the promise of freedom as was given to God’s followers in the Old Testament. Princeton University Religion professor Albert Raboteau elaborates upon this in his seminal work *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South*, in which he draws upon the writings of slaves to investigate the origins of the Black Church. Based upon these documents Raboteau notes that slaves connected with the story of the Exodus because it helped to give them a sense “of historical identity as a people.” In fact, Black connection with the Exodus story and the Israelite leader Moses was so strong, a

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46 Anna Isaacs, “How the Black Lives Matter and Palestinian Movement Converged.”


48 Ibid., 16.

49 Ibid.


51 Ibid., 311.
Union Army chaplain wrote in 1864 that he feared slaves regarded Christ as a secondary figure to Moses.\(^52\)

Judith Kay also explains that when teaching Christianity white masters often left out the Exodus narrative as a way of using the Bible as a means of suppression, aware that such a narrative could be used as a powerful tool of resistance.\(^53\) However, this attempt at teaching Christianity while leaving out one of its most important stories failed, as slaves used subversive methods to expand their biblical knowledge and adapt their master’s religion for their own means.\(^54\) Professor Kay touches upon the methods and effects of this, writing,

> The slaves' access to the Exodus story was covert; the text itself subverted the pie-in-the-sky Protestantism to which most slaves had been exposed. The Exodus figura stood simultaneously within the religion of the oppressor and, in black hands, as a challenge to the white Christian typology. . . . Africans had ritual practices of conjuring their gods with whatever was at hand. Eventually the Exodus story became in black hands a powerful tool to conjure a mighty God who was on their side.\(^55\)

It was therefore from the roots of slavery that the Exodus narrative became entrenched in the Black Church, continuing to serve as a source of spiritual strength for Black Americans through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement.\(^56\) However, even with slavery’s end, Kay remarks that for many Blacks, America did not become the Promised Land as it was for white Protestants, but a new Egypt with freedom always on the horizon and just out of reach.\(^57\) Intriguingly, this belief paralleled the use of the Exodus motif for many Jewish

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 311-312.


\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
immigrants as well who, according to Kay, viewed America as a Promised Land second to Zion (and what would later become the modern state of Israel).\textsuperscript{58} This in turn led to Blacks and Jews having a sense of shared identification, an identification that both communities were quick to recognize, as according to noted essayist James Baldwin, “. . . the Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew. . . . in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt.”\textsuperscript{59} This shared moral and religious bedrock would serve as the underpinning for why Jews felt obligated to work on Black freedom struggles. More than just this theoretical framework however, Jews had practical reasons for working for civil rights as well, reasoning that can be tied to the ways in which Jews in particular understood the threat faced by Blacks in a country where liberation always looked just out of reach.

In the mid-twentieth Century both Jews and Blacks found that their continued persecution led to another type of understanding similar to that of the Exodus narrative. During the 1930s and the rise of fascism in Europe, many African American leaders were quick to compare, and decry, Nazi anti-Semitism and American racism in the same breath.\textsuperscript{60} In his 2002 book \textit{Torn at the Roots}, Michael Staub argues that the parallels between Black suffering under Jim Crow and Jewish discrimination under the Nazi regime were “rhetorical common sense” for Black thinkers.\textsuperscript{61} As a result, many African American publications of the time included articles and commentaries on the “‘master Ku Kluxer of Germany’” and argued that Blacks had a particular responsibility to contest fascism and the treatment of Jews in Germany because they knew that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 28-29.
\item \textsuperscript{59} James Baldwin, \textit{Notes of a Native Son} (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), 60.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Staub, \textit{Torn at the Roots}, 22.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 22.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
treatment all to well themselves. However, while it is undoubtedly true that many of these commentaries called for fighting anti-Semitism for altruistic reasons, Black leaders also recognized that the Nazis believed in a particularly dangerous form of white supremacy, one which could easily take over in the United States, and it some cases already had. For example, Mississippi Senator Theodore G. Bilbo and Mississippi Representatives John E. Rankin and James O. Eastland were often quoted for their particularly harsh brand of anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism with fascist overtones, which they exposed at the federal government’s highest levels.

African American fear of more violent forms of anti-Black racism overtaking the country led to continuous calls of denunciation of Nazi fascism, particularly from the NAACP’s official magazine, *The Crisis*. Staub notes that *The Crisis* regularly wrote articles using Nazi symbols and imagery to describe American white supremacy. Examples of this included fear of “‘Storm Trooper Fascism in the flesh,’” the headline “‘Southern Schrecklichkeit [Southern Horrors],’” and the sarcastic comment “‘And America gagged at Nazi concentration camp cruelties!’” It is important to note however, that *The Crisis* in particular stood at the forefront of African American publications that used the language of Nazis to speak about American racism, as the

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62 Ibid., 23. In his writing Staub specifically mentions the *Afro-American*, however in an endnote he also mentions the *Washington Tribune*, and *Amsterdam News*, as researched and written on by Lunabelle Wedlock in *The Reaction of Negro Publications and Organizations to German Anti-Semitism*, Staub, 313, endnote 4.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.


66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 24.
NAACP had a historic relationship with Jews. In the 1930s Jews composed nearly to one-half of the NAACP’s legal committee while Arthur Spingarn and Joel Spingarn had each previously served as NAACP President. It thus makes sense that the NAACP would take particular note of growing anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism in America and abroad, as its Jewish members would have been particularly sensitive to the similarities between their organizations efforts against racism in the U.S. and those of individuals struggling against German anti-Semitism in Europe. Additionally, just as the African American members of the NAACP were fearful of the spread of fascist racism in America, the Jews of the NAACP certainly would not have wanted the rhetoric that had taken over Europe to take hold in the United States as well. As will be argued later on, Jewish assimilation into America as “white” served as a survival mechanism for Jews, making the prevention of the spread of Nazi ideology to the U.S. an area of emphasis if Jews were to continue making America their home.

Additionally, just as African American publications were taking up arms against Nazi rhetoric and action, so too were Jewish magazines and newspapers comparing the evils of Hitler with that of the Ku Klux Klan and racist American politicians. If Crisis led this effort on behalf of Black Americans, then it was the American Jewish Committee’s (AJC’s) Commentary that produced satirical headlines on racist housing practices such as “‘Homes for Aryans Only,’” and

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68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 25. Here Staub also mentions major Jews spokespeople who worked on NAACP projects including Louis Brandeis, Felix Frankfurter, Jack Greenberg, Louis Marshall, Henry Moskowitz, Julius Rosenwald, Jacob Schiff, Lillian Wald, and Rabbi Stephen Wise.

70 Ibid., 25-26.

71 Not to be confused with the American Jewish Congress or AJCongress, an organization which features heavily in subsequent chapters.
reports on racist laws such as “‘Alaska’s Nuremberg Laws.’” As with those Jews involved with the NAACP and therefore *Crisis*, it is easy to understand why *Commentary* would be hypersensitive to racial policies and violence in the U.S. For American Jews, if Blacks were being targeted for racial issues, the Jews might be next. Thus, common sense would dictate that for Jews to maintain any sense of security in the United States, it would be prudent to try and eliminate any of the racial discourse in the U.S. that had permeated Europe. This practical reason to help Blacks gain civil rights as a way to also protect Jews, in addition to the fact that Jews and Blacks shared a deep ideological identity over the Exodus narrative, may help to explain why Jews became so entrenched within the Civil Rights Movement.

*Black Power Ideology*

“This is the twenty-seventh time that I’ve been arrested. I ain’t going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin’ us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!” –Stokely Carmichael, 1966

When Stokely Carmichael spoke the above words on a hot Mississippi night in June 1966 during the March Against Fear, he permanently altered the course of the fight for Black American rights. For Black liberation activists the Black Power Movement sparked by Carmichael and his followers marked the start of a new form of racial consciousness grounded in elements of militarism and radicalism, reshaping the respectability politics and non-violent

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72 Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 26. “Alaska’s Nuremburg Laws” focused on racist practices against indigenous peoples, but was targeting racist practices nonetheless.


74 Carmichael would later change his name to Kwame Ture, however to avoid confusion he will be referred to as Stokely Carmichael in this work.

resistance for which King’s Civil Rights Movement had become known. Before helping to sculpt what would become the Black Power Movement, Carmichael himself was seen as a growing leader in the traditional Civil Rights Movement through his leadership in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and as Peniel Joseph writes in *Stokely: A Life*, his “vision of a radical democracy that he defined as . . . plac[ing] rural black sharecroppers and the urban poor as leaders in a new society freed from racial inequality and economic injustice.” However, his role as a King-like leader ended in 1966, and while the March Against Fear and Carmichael’s impassioned speech that year may have introduced the term “Black Power” to America, it was Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* which expressed Black Power’s meaning to the masses.

In the front matter to their work, *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamliton write, "This book presents a political framework and ideology which represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerrilla warfare. That such violent warfare may be unavoidable is not herein denied. But if there is the slightest chance to avoid it, the politics of Black Power as described in this book is seen as the only viable hope." Here Hamilton and Carmichael clearly denounce the slow moving and strictly non-violent process the Civil Rights Movement had embraced until that point, highlighted by their statement, “That such violent warfare may be unavoidable is not herein denied.” With this declaration, Carmichael and Hamilton make clear to their reader that this is not the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his non-violent followers, rather, a new form of liberation work that was about to take hold, one which no longer denied the possibility of violent upheaval if Blacks were

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76 Ibid., 2-3.


continued to be deprived of the rights they deserved. For two young men to speak out in such a way against a movement and man in King who had become known world wide was nothing less than revolutionary in the history of Black liberation struggles. 79

In order to understand the ways in which Black Power ideology would create a crisis of identity for liberal Jewish Americans it is important to understand Black Power views on assimilation, the middle-class, and coalitions. To that end Carmichael and Hamilton dedicate the first chapter of their work to the state of white supremacy as it stood in 1967. 80 Entitled “White Power: The Colonial Situation,” chapter one of Black Power goes through the pedagogical motions of defining terms such as racism 81 and respectability politics 82 before making the following claim about assimilation:

In a manner similar to that of the colonial powers in Africa, American society indicates avenues of escape from the ghetto for those individuals who adapt to the ‘mainstream.’ This adaptation means to disassociate oneself from the black race, its culture, community and heritage, and become immersed (dispersed is another term) in the white world. 83

This reference to adaption to the mainstream, and therefore disassociation from the Black race, is clearly a reference to calls for Black Americans to try and assimilate into white culture taking place in the Civil Rights Movement. Here, Carmichael and Hamilton, and in turn those others who advocated Black Power, assert that assimilation is nothing short of a racial whitewashing is not something that civil rights leaders should be advocating. According to Stokely and Hamilton, assimilation serves as nothing more than a white constructed answer to the racial problems of 

79 Peniel E. Joseph, Stokely: A Life, xiii.
81 Ibid., 2-3.
82 Ibid., 5.
83 Ibid., 30.
America, calling for the shedding of ones blackness and accepting the culture of the oppressor. *Black Power* makes clear that this is an unacceptable expectation for Blacks and counters it by arguing that rather than assimilate, Black Americans must create their own bases of power in order to place themselves on equal political and economic playing fields.\(^84\) Furthermore, Carmichael and Hamilton deftly point out that asking Blacks to assimilate into American, i.e. white, culture ignores history.\(^85\) Often, they argue, white society tries to tell Blacks to behave and that through patience they will earn their rights just, “how other immigrants finally won acceptance . . .”\(^86\) This does not hold water however, when history shows that it was not through keeping one’s head down that equality was won, but rather it was through the building of power, more specifically “. . . Irish Power, Italian Power, Polish Power or Jewish Power,” that immigrants and other ethnic groups were able to negotiate and gain rights through positions of strength.\(^87\) The truth is, according to Carmichael and Hamilton, whites want to deny this same power to Blacks because the rights guaranteed by the Constitution were never meant for African Americans and, if left up to white society, never would be.\(^88\)

After writing on the dangers of assimilation, the young revolutionaries continue to critique American society when they write that the middle-class “is the backbone of institutional racism in this country.”\(^89\) Carmichael and Hamilton support this statement by asserting that the

\(^{84}\text{Ibid., 50-51.}\)
\(^{85}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{86}\text{Ibid., 51. Italics in originial.}\)
\(^{87}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{88}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{89}\text{Ibid., 41. Italics in original.}\)
The middle-class is a class based solely on the accumulation of material wealth with a substantial lack of regard for humanity.\textsuperscript{90} In order to accumulate this wealth, the middle-class peddles in false claims of freedom and competition while actively “. . . denying to black people the opportunity to compete.”\textsuperscript{91} This is an important point for Carmichael and Hamilton because they believed the Civil Rights Movement, as it stood in 1967, was pushing heavily for Blacks to join the middle-class without them being fully aware of the institutional racism the class promoted.\textsuperscript{92} Carmichael and Hamilton found it hypocritical for Blacks to be encouraged to join an economic and societal class that was actively build upon their oppression through denying them access to economic competition. This denouncement of the middle-class, in tangent with Carmichael and Hamilton’s worries about assimilation, very clearly countered the mainstream Civil Rights narrative of the time,\textsuperscript{93} a fact which would deeply affect politically active liberal Jews.

The final component of Black Power ideology that needs explanation here, and is established in \textit{Black Power: The Politics of Liberation}, can be summarized best by Carmichael and Hamilton’s title for their third chapter, “The Myths of Coalition.”\textsuperscript{94} While the authors make clear that they are not opposed to coalitions,\textsuperscript{95} in fact they write on a dream of a poor Black and white coalition,\textsuperscript{96} they do argue that the Civil Rights Movement was failing because those non-

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 41.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 58-59.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 82.
Blacks that Civil Rights leaders had formed coalitions with were only willing to work on behalf of Blacks so far as their political and economic interests were not threatened.\textsuperscript{97} In particular Carmicheal and Hamilton argue,

\begin{quote}
The major mistake made by exponents of the coalition theory is that they advocate alliances with groups which have never had as their central goal the revamping of the society. At bottom, those groups accept the American system and want only—if at all—to make peripheral, marginal reforms in it. Such reforms are inadequate to rid the society of racism.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

Here Carmichael and Hamilton contend that while liberal non-Black groups may have helped Blacks and worked alongside them in the civil rights struggle, American society itself is inherently racist and must be entirely reshaped.\textsuperscript{99} With Civil Rights organizations such as the NAACP and the King led Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) build largely on cross-community coalition, this condemnation, in conjunction with their anti-assimilation and middle-class stance, clearly marked Carmichael, Hamilton, and other Black Power adherents as being in contention with the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. This was a contention which, as will be further expounded upon, deeply effected many American Jews.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 69-71.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 60-61.
Chapter II: Assimilation

“Whether justified or not, I, the white man, have become in the eyes of others a symbol of arrogance and pretension . . .” –Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1963

Questions and concerns over assimilation were not just a part of Black Power ideology, but had served as a major point of contention in Jewish religious and political circles for decades as Jews continued to grapple with how to best assimilate into American culture. Leading Jewish scholar and Brandies University professor Jonathan Sarna writes on the political and social struggles Jews have dealt with in America in the introduction to the anthology The Jewish American Experience. Here Sarna argues that Jewish American history is made of the wedding between two historical traditions: Judaism and the American dream. As a result Jewish American tradition is one “rooted in ambivalence” as Jews are pulled by the desire to be both Jewish and the oftentimes conflicting desire of becoming fully Americanized. Professor Sarna goes on to assert that while it is hazardous to generalize the experience of any community, the Jewish American experience can be broadly explained through four characteristic features and five ongoing challenges. While it is unnecessary to take up each of these characteristics and


101 Staub, Torn at the Roots, 10-11.

102 Dr. Sarna was named one of America’s most influential American Jews by Forward magazine in 2004. See “Department of Near Eastern Studies Faculty: Jonathan D. Sarna,” Brandeis University, accessed February 22, 2017, http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/nejs/faculty/sarna.html.


104 Ibid., xiii.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., xiv.
challenges in full, a select few are helpful to understand Jewish debate over assimilation and the eventual effect Black Power ideology would have on liberal Jews.

The first characteristic Sarna lists as being crucial to understanding the Jewish American experience is what he calls a “Belief in the promise of American life.”\textsuperscript{107} Professor Sarna explains that the so-called promise of America, specifically America’s promise of freedom and opportunity, served as inspiration for Jewish immigrants from Europe used to ghetto life and the constant harassment of the Old World.\textsuperscript{108} Part and parcel of this belief in the promise of American life is Sarna’s second characteristic, “Faith in pluralism.”\textsuperscript{109} Sarna argues that many American Jews have held onto a pluralistic theory of American society that rejected calls for conformity and instead promoted ethnic diversity.\textsuperscript{110} Given the history of mistreatment mentioned previously in the Old World, Jews were quick to adopt this theory of American society, one which allowed them to exist as Jews in both faith and culture.\textsuperscript{111}

An example of Jewish American belief in the promise of America and faith in American pluralism can be seen in the writings of Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz. Rabbi Rabinowitz served as the spiritual leader of the Adas Israel Congregation, a Washington, D.C. area conservative synagogue, between 1960 and 1986, witnessing both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement—both of which often spoke on from his pulpit.\textsuperscript{112} In one such sermon, housed at the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{107} Ibid., xiv. Italics removed.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{109} Ibid. Italics removed.
\item \textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Rees Shapiro, “Stanley Rabinowitz, former rabbi of Washington’s Adas Israel Congregation, dies,” \textit{The Washington Post}.
\end{itemize}
Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington, Rabbi Rabinowitz spoke broadly on the topic of free will and specifically on the struggles Jews had undergone to survive in America.\footnote{Stanley Rabinowitz, “The Jewish Accent on Freedom,” box 3, folder “Free-Will,” Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington.} Intermixed between stories of hardship and triumph the Rabbi continually drew upon the theme of America’s promise by highlighting the acts of both individuals and institutions that showed America allowing anyone to succeed if they simply worked hard enough.\footnote{Ibid.} Rabbi Rabinowitz then notes the following concerning American culture,

> America has always been a pluralistic society. Its glory has been the multifaceted coloration of its ethnic composition. . . .This, perhaps, is the source of its strength as a nation and from which there derives the virility of American life and culture.\footnote{Ibid., 4.}

It seems then that, for this rabbi of a large and historic temple in the nation’s capital,\footnote{Rees Shapiro, “Stanley Rabinowitz,” \textit{Washington Post}.} the glory of America was not its military might or world influence, but that its multifaceted ethnic makeup created a country with a “passionate dedication to social justice.”\footnote{Rabinowitz, “The Jewish Accent on Freedom,” 4.}

However, if, as Professor Sarna asserts, faith in pluralism is one of the tenants of Jewish American tradition, it is easy to see how debates about the role of assimilation would have arisen in Jewish communities. Holding strong convictions on the promise of America’s freedom and opportunity while also viewing America as a beacon a pluralism are characteristics that are inherently at odds; how can one fulfill the promise of American life while trying to resist conformity and maintain a culture developed outside of the United States? These were and are
important questions for Jewish Americans, questions which Sarna includes in his list of the five key challenges to Jewish American life.  

According to Sarna, questions concerning assimilation and identity are “. . . the foremost challenge of American Jewish life[.]” As Jews have tried to find their place in America, Professor Sarna asserts that a tension developed which “. . . pits the desire to become American and to conform to American norms against the fear that Jews by conforming too much will cease to be distinctive and soon disappear.” This is a deeply troubling tension for many Jews who, especially after World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, held legitimate fears about losing young Jews to the draw of secular American life. As with comparisons between Nazi fascism and American anti-Black racism mentioned in chapter one, the debate over how strongly a role assimilation should play in Jewish American life played out in Jewish magazines and publications such as *Commentary*. Writing in a 1952 article, *Commentary* editor Elliot Cohen argued that Jews should pride themselves on becoming American as it was a crucial tool in fighting anti-Semitism: “‘If the American Christian does not meet the Jew or the Negro in his church or his club, he will meet him in his parent-teacher association or his union local.’” As this quotation indicates, for Cohen, the only way gentile Americans would be able to meet Jews, get to know Jews, and therefore treat Jews like they were true Americans, was for Jews to

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119 Ibid., Italics added.

120 Ibid.

121 Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 10.

122 Ibid., 37.

123 As quoted in Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 37.
assimilate and participate in everyday American society, such as going to the parent-teacher association or local union chapter meetings.

It seems then that, while fear of losing their Jewish identity did permeate through Jewish political dialogue, the use of assimilation as a means to establish a home in America was an intriguing one for many liberal American Jews. Trinity College professor Cheryl Lynn Greenberg notes this in her book *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* speaking specifically on the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank in Atlanta, Georgia.¹²⁴ According to Greenberg, while the Frank case illustrated the ever-present danger of anti-Semitism in the United States, for many Jewish Americans it pointed to the importance of assimilation; the sooner Jews could become white the sooner they would be free of anti-Semitic violence.¹²⁵ Thus, regardless of the debates over assimilation and fear of losing Jewish youth to the draws of secular life, by the 1960s and the rise of the Black Power Movement, many liberal Jews, including leading Civil Rights advocates, saw themselves as having successfully assimilated into American culture and obtained the label of “white.”

Evidence of Jews using assimilation as a mean of becoming “white” in the American cultural context is widespread throughout liberal Jewish writings in the 1960s. In a January 1963 speech given to the “National Conference on Religion and Race,” hosted by the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, close friend of Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and outspoken Black civil rights

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¹²⁴ Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 45. According to Greenberg, “In 1913 [Leo] Frank was accused of molesting and murdering Mary Phagan, a young white employee in his pencil factory. Convicted largely on the testimony of an African American janitor, the only other suspect, Frank was sentenced to die. The overt anti-Semitism surrounding his trial convinced the governor to commute Frank’s sentence to life imprisonment. The decision led an outraged mob to drag Frank from prison in 1915 and lynch him.” See Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 28.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 45.
advocate spoke on the Jewish theological basis of participating in civil rights work. While the speech Heschel gave was not centered specifically on assimilation, he did make a striking statement which spoke to the state of Jewish assimilation during the Civil Rights Movement:

Whether justified or not, I, the white man, have become in the eyes of others a symbol of arrogance and pretension, giving offense to other human beings, hurting their pride, even without intending it.

Here Rabbi Heschel, a deeply religious man with long beard and curly hair, makes an extremely interesting move when he describes himself as “I, the white man.” As noted previously, this speech, entitled “The Religious Basis of Equality of Opportunity,” was not centered on assimilation or philosophical questions over race, but was instead focused on religion, specifically Judaism, and what religious doctrine says about the treatment of others. And yet, while Heschel could just as easily called himself a Jew, or, given that he was speaking at a Catholic organization’s event, said “you, the white man,” he chose to mark himself as being apart of the white racial category in America, clearly denoting a belief that he, as a Jew, had successfully assimilated. Additionally, Rabbi Heschel was not the only prevalent Jew in that era to allude to Jewish whiteness, as similar moves are made throughout the writings of the members of the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) during the period of Black Power’s foundation and growth.

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126 Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 111.


128 Ibid., 4. Italics added.

129 Ibid.
Founded in 1916 by European and Russian Jews indignant over the German Jewish controlled American Jewish Committee (AJC), the AJCongress was long considered to be the more radical of these two leading Jewish organizations. Frustrated with the elitism which permeated the American Jewish Committee, from its inception the AJCongress held progressive stances on race and class issues and supported the use of public protest as a means of progressing political discourse. These early commitments to progressive issues led to the AJCongress eventually adopting liberalism as its defining political ideology in the face of European fascism and German Nazism. This liberalism permeated through the AJCongress’ multiple departments, including a litigation department for court cases involving discrimination, resulting in the AJCongress adopting civil rights issues as one of its core tenants decades before the modern Civil Rights Movement would begin. When the Civil Rights Movement did take off it, and the AJCongress’ role in it, was a major preoccupation for the AJCongress and its members, a fact affirmed through the sheer amount of space the topic took up in AJCongress writings, conventions, and programs throughout the 1960s.

Particular samples of writings and speeches produced by the AJCongress and its members illustrate that, like Rabbi Heschel, liberal, politically active Jews in the late 1960s

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131 Greenberg, Troubling the Waters, 36.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., 53.

134 Ibid.
identified themselves as having assimilated successfully into white America. In a speech given at the American Jewish Congress National Biennial Convention in 1966, chairman of the AJCongress’s Commission on Law and Social Action Howard M. Squadron remarks, in reference to a larger discussion on Black anti-Semitism, that, “the Jewish community more than any other segment of White America has led the fight for Negro rights . . .” In another speech on the same day of the Convention as Squadron’s, Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld of the Fairmount Temple in Cleveland, Ohio spoke on Black-Jewish solidarity and why Black anti-Semitism exists when he stated flatly, “. . . whites are the oppressors….Jews are white . . .” If these two speeches are any indication, in 1966 Jews were, and considered themselves to be, white.

To the modern reader it may seem obvious that Jews were and are considered white in America society, but, as indicated earlier, for those Jews who had been involved in debates over assimilation, saying as Rabbi Lelyveld did, “Jews are white,” did not come without serious political implications and after years of anguish. As Michael Staub points out in Torn at the Roots, Jews often felt a sense of “doubleness as both insiders and outsiders to American society[,]” as they dealt with rising and falling waves of anti-Semitism both at home and

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abroad. Additionally, the idea of Jews maintaining a type of doubleness and moving in and out of whiteness falls in line with Charles Mills’ conception of a Racial Contract. As mentioned previously, Mills’ argues that the white power structure is able to evolve as the criteria for who is considered white and nonwhite changes over time. According Mills, communities such as the Irish and the Jews maintained a sort of borderline whiteness, however the evidence presented here suggested that in the 1960s the borderline for Jews was gone and they had in fact joined the white power structure. Indeed it seems that, regardless of the political debate over assimilation, by 1966 Jews had assimilated and they considered themselves apart of white America. Thus, when Black Power began questioning and criticizing assimilation as a means of achieving equality, it resulted in these same Jews assessing the consequences of what it meant to now be called white.

Crossroads: Black Power and Jewish Whiteness

As established in the first chapter of this text, Black Power ideology specifically opposed assimilation as a means of achieving equality. In Black Power: The Politics of Liberation, Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael accuse those who promote assimilation as trying to force Blacks to “disassociate” from their people and culture as a means to further suppress them. To explain this, Hamilton and Carmichael use the model of Portuguese colonies in which Blacks could earn legal freedoms if they became what was called an assimilado. To

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138 Staub, Torn at the Roots, 11.
140 Ibid., 78-79.
142 Ibid.
become an assimilato the African person must take on “Portuguese customs, dress, language . . .” and most notably “. . . reject as intrinsically inferior his entire African heritage and association.” Hamilton and Carmichael compare this to what is expected of Black Americans who wish to gain rights through assimilation and go on to speak about those Black Americans who have, to whatever extent possible, assimilated into white America:

To the extent that he does [assimilate], he is considered ‘well adjusted’—one who has ‘risen above the race question.’ These people are frequently held up by the white Establishment as living examples of the progress being made by the society in solving the race problem. Suffice it to say that precisely because they are required to denounce—overtly or covertly—their black race, they are reinforcing racism in this country. By accusing those Black Americans who had assimilated into white American culture as reinforcing racism, Hamilton and Carmichael not only denounce the notion of assimilation as being unscrupulous, but also decry those who have already undergone the process of assimilation for reinforcing the racism they were attempting to protect themselves against. For a people who had already undergone generations of debate over the role of assimilation, arguments such as this in the racial discourse of the country only served to open old wounds for many liberal Jews.

As previously stated, regardless of debates on its merit, Jewish assimilation into white America was a fact in the 1960s. However, given the nature of the debate that had raged in Jewish communities over assimilation, Black Power rhetoric had a deep effect on liberal Jews. Liberal Jewish response to accusations by Black Power that assimilating into white culture was racist generally went through two phases: first, some Jews accused Black Power and its leaders as incorrect and promoting racist ideology themselves; and, two, those same liberal Jews

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid., 31. Italics in original.
eventually seemed to acquiesce to Hamilton and Carmichael and urge their fellow Jews to draw back closer to their own communities while still supporting Black civil rights.

Evidence of this response to the Black Power critique of assimilation can be seen in a document entitled “An Open Letter To SNCC” written by actor, folksinger, national vice-president of the AJCongress, and co-chair of the AJCongress’s Commission on Jewish Affairs, Theodore Bikel. Written as a personal letter, but endorsed by AJCongress leadership as reflecting the views of the AJCongress and as an “eloquent–indeed, a passionate–statement by an American and a Jew deeply committed to the unity of the Jewish people and the brotherhood of all men,” “An Open Letter to SNCC” is a scathing critique of The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as it stood in the late 1960s under Stokely Carmichael’s leadership. Bikel starts his letter by establishing that he is a Jewish champion of the Civil Rights Movement and specifically answered the calls of SNCC leadership to act on racial injustice in the past. By placing himself in this context, Bikel attempts to establish himself as someone who has the authority to be critical of SNCC and, given his sacrifice, as a man who has been unjustly wronged by SNCC and its new leadership. Bikel then focuses on criticizing SNCC in a two-pronged attack. First, and for the majority of the letter, Bikel attacks SNCC for referring to Israel as an illegal state and speaks on the history of Israel being a Jewish safe haven that has helped Blacks across the world while Arabs have done nothing to support the African diaspora. While a year of publication is not given on this document, it is clear that this aspect


146 Ibid.

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid.
of Bikel’s letter is a response to a 1967 SNCC newsletter that highly criticized Israel to the
distain of SNCC’s liberal Jewish supporters. While the aspect of the document which
condemns SNCC’s criticism of Israel is important in understanding Bikel’s motivation for his
letter, it is the second part of his attack that is the most crucial in understanding the effects Black
Power’s critique of assimilation had on liberal minded Jews.

In the second half of his letter Bikel transitions from condemning SNCC for its anti-Israel
stance to reprimanding Black Power as a whole. Specifically Bikel writes “I supported Black
Power as a political concept; as a tool of anarchy I find it reprehensible . . . The assumption that,
by definition, all whites are enemies and all blacks are friends is as simplistic as it is untrue.”

This is a crucial moment in understanding Jewish response to Black Power. While for Bikel this
portraying of Black Power as an anti-white doctrine and tool of anarchy may be an extension of
his anger over SNCC’s thoughts on Israel, it can also be seen as a distinctly separate anger and
fear manifesting itself. It is one thing for Bikel to react to SNCC and its new Black Power
leaders for anti-Zionist rhetoric, but it is another thing entirely when Bikel describes Black
Power as “a revolution without a blueprint.” By calling into question, not just anti-Zionist
sentiment, but the movement as a whole as being directionless, even dangerous, Bikel distinctly
calls Black Power into question as a movement. Given the amount of times Bikel criticizes
SNCC for referring, not to the Jew, but to the white man as the enemy—five times in roughly

149 This suspicion is confirmed in an article written by Bikel’s wife, Aimee Ginsburg Bikel, in
August of 2016 in which Ginsburg Bikel provides context and a date for her husband’s letter. See Aimee
Ginsburg Bikel, “What Happens to a Dream Gone Wrong?” Tablet, August 16, 2016, accessed November


151 Ibid.
three pages—\textsuperscript{152} it becomes clear that Bikel is not only upset about SNCC’s rhetoric concerning Israel, but that when SNCC condemns help from whites, Jews are now included as a part of that enemy. Bikel is clearly proud of the work he has done on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement, he goes out of his way to note his work, but when his status as assimilated white becomes the end of a harsh criticism, Bikel acts defensively and dismisses Black Power entirely. And to reiterate, Bikel is not speaking only for himself in this document, but for the whole of the AJCongress leadership who published a forethought asserting that the letter reflects their views.\textsuperscript{153}

And yet, while the letter written by Bikel and endorsed by the AJCongress is a clear condemnation of SNCC and Black Power rhetoric, it is also clear that the AJCongress did not give up on its mission for equal rights for African Americans as exemplified in the AJCongress initiative “Project Transfer.” “Project Transfer” is made reference to in the minutes from an AJCongress executive committee meeting which took place on October 21, 1969 with discussion topic one of the minutes entitled “Guaranteed Note Fund—Project Transfer.”\textsuperscript{154} While the discussion during this meeting was less on the goals of the project and more on the status of its feasibility, the minutes do note the following, “. . . the principle objective of Project Transfer was to facilitate the shift of businesses in ghettoes from Jewish to Negro owners.”\textsuperscript{155} Given the clear embrace of an anti-Black Power stance as expressed just two years earlier in “An Open Letter to

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
SNCC,” it is quite surprising that the AJCongress was embarking on a project in the vein of Black Power ideology. Recalling from chapter one the fact that Black Power condemned assimilation and additionally called for Black economic and political power, a project in which ghetto business were to be handed over to Black owners seems to be operating within Black Power discourse. Additionally, it is telling that Project Transfer did not seem to call for Black business owners to assimilate into the larger white American economy, but in fact encouraged Jews to remove themselves completely and allow the Black businessperson to operate within their own community. This would seem to indicate that, rather than continuing to promote assimilation as a tool for civil rights, the AJCongress began adhering to the calls of Black Power for Blacks to work within their own communities on issues of importance such as small business ownership.

Project Transfer becomes even more indicative of the larger, two-step response Jews had towards the Black Power stance on assimilation, especially when placed in conversation with other writings by liberal Jews. For example, Adas Israel Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz presents an example of this two-phase response to Black Power in one of his sermons he gave on the status of race relations in America. Given some time after the development of Black Power, and entitled “The Negro and the Jew: Collision or Collaboration?” Rabbi Rabinowitz attempts to answer the question posed in his title given the “emerging separation between the Jewish community and the Negro community[,]” he sees growing since the birth of Black Power. Rabbi Rabinowitz begins by outlining four divisions he sees in the Black American

156 There is no date stamp on this sermon however Rabinowitz references Black Power and Black militants suggesting it was given sometime after the development of Black Power and the Black Panther Party, possibly dating the sermon between 1966 and 1968.

community.158 These four categories are roughly as follows; first the African American who supports non-violent integration.159 Second are “alienated reformers” who Rabnowitz believed to support non-violence and coalition based societal reform such as in schools and local politics.160 Third are “Black Power Moderates”161 who held militant tendencies but were non-violent and who wanted to develop a stronger Black community with white accommodation possible, but not white collaboration.162 And the fourth and final division are “Black Power Militants,” who Rabinowtz argued “believe that America is a racist society beyond hope. They are opposed to collaboration with any whites . . . They view black rejection of the white as essential to solidifying the black community. . . . for liberal support means only white control . . .”163

Whether this categorization of Black political thought at the time of this sermon were correct is not of issue, although it is interesting the note the ways in which Rabinowtz clearly parsed out different aspects of Black Power, Black Panther, and non-violent ideology to create these four divisions. What is of interest however is Rabinowtz’s response to these four categories when he wrote,

Jews are more sympathetic to the first two groups. As long as the Civil Rights Movement used non-violent means to achieve its goal of integration, few withheld support. . . . However, when violence and separatism replaced integration and non-violence, many Jews have had second thoughts about cooperation with the Negro.164

158 Ibid., 3-5
159 Ibid., 3-4.
160 Ibid., 4.
161 Ibid. Rabinowitz actually crossed out the word moderate in pen but to distinguish between this group and his fourth group “Black Power Militants” I have kept the word “Moderate” in.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid., 5.
164 Ibid., 5-6.
Here Rabinowitz outlined the first phase of Jewish response to Black Power described above; a denunciation of a militaristic, if not violent, Black Power Movement and a condemnation of Black anti-Semitism believed to have risen out of the Movement. However, after a few pages of describing what he sees as the causes of Black anti-Semitism, Rabbi Rabinowitz made a statement that speaks to the second phase of Jewish response to Black Power, eventual adherence to Black Power ideals:

The white community in which integrationist Negroes demand full entrance does not exist, for there is no white community. There is, in fact, only a series of private circles. . . . Then perhaps there is less danger of collision with Black Power, as militant as it may appear at the present, than there is from the moderates who seek complete and full integration into a world which has not been and may not ever come to pass.165

The rabbi is quoted here directly and at length because it crucial to understand that Rabinowitz seems to be agreeing with Black Power’s stance on assimilation. In this sermon Rabinowitz explains the initial condemnation of Black Power for violence and anti-Semitism before eventually endorsing the notion established by Hamilton and Carmichael that there is no assimilation, only community power bases166 that integrationists and assimilationists are unable, or unwilling, to recognize. Rabinowitz’s response to Black Power, that “. . . there is no white community. . . .” also seems to suggest that the idea of an assimilated white culture made up of different ethnic groups that became white is nothing more than a façade.167 In truth, if Rabinowitz’s argument is to be followed, Jews are nothing more than one of America’s many ethnic groups that pretend to have assimilated but really exist in their own communities, an

165 Ibid., 12-13.

166 This is referring to the Italian, Jewish, Polish, etc. power quote in Ture and Hamilton, Black Power, 51.

existence Rabinowitz seems to agree with Black Power advocates on who realized the façade of assimilation all along.

Thus, as the evidence presented here shows, when Jews were faced with Black Power disapproval of assimilation there was a two-part response. First, like Bikel in his letter, Jews, who at the time considered themselves to have assimilated into white America attacked Black Power for being racist and violent. Second, those same Jews, epitomized by the AJCongress leadership who endorsed Bikel’s letter, and Rabbi Rabinowitz, recognized the merits of Black Power’s ideology, creating projects to help Blacks establish their own power structure and acknowledging that the white America Jews had assimilated into might not in fact exist. Similar to when a person is scolded only to realize the scolding is warranted, this two-part attack speaks to Jews feeling attacked over their newfound whiteness, before realizing the merits of Black Power’s arguments.
Chapter III: The Middle Class and Coalitions

The Middle Class

“This class is the backbone of institutional racism in this country.” -Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael.168

Crucial to Black Power’s defiance towards assimilation as a mode in which to gain equal rights is a critique of the American middle-class. In Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America Stockely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton recognize that in the 1960s the middle-class had been painted as a bastion of inclusivity and an economic and social symbol that Blacks should strive to enter.169 Regardless of the perceived benefits of the middle-class to society however, Hamilton and Carmichael argue that,

The values of this society support a racist system; we find it incongruous to ask black people to adopt and support most of those values. . . . The goal of black people must not be to assimilate into middle-class America, for that class—as a whole—is without a viable conscience as regards to humanity.170

As explained in the first chapter of this work, Hamilton and Carmichael recast the middle-class from its virtuous status as holder of the American Dream to an economic and social class that maintains itself on the backs of Black labor and denies Black access freedom and opportunity.171 Hamilton and Carmichael went on to claim that they were first members of the Black liberation

169 Ibid., 40. Here Hamilton and Carmichael reference Edward Banfield and James Q. Wilson, who point out the benefits of the middle class including that “The middle class supplies a social and political leavening in the life of a city. Middle-class people demand good schools and integrity in government. . . . It is the middle class, in short, that asserts a conception of the public interest.” See Edward Banfield and James Q. Wilson, City Politics (New York: Random House, 1965), 14.
170 Ibid. Italics in original.
171 Ibid., 40-41.
movement to even question the middle-class as an institution.\textsuperscript{172} Thus, Hamilton and Carmichael call for a “reorientation” to emphasize human dignity rather than the accumulation of wealth which those in the middle-class are alleged to value above all else,\textsuperscript{173} a reorientation which many liberal Jews undertook in earnest.

Unlike the Jewish liberal response to Black Power’s criticism of assimilation, members of the AJCongress seemed to agree with Black Power ideology on the middle-class early on, and, in fact, spoke out critically of middle-class complacency. In his speech to the AJCongress National Biennial Convention on April 28, 1966, Cleveland, Ohio Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld\textsuperscript{174} speaks passionately about the need for civil rights work and the particular obligation Jews have towards this endeavor.\textsuperscript{175} Acknowledging that too many of his fellow Jews had become ambivalent to the Black struggle, Rabbi Lelyveld made the following realization,

\begin{quote}
It is so much more comfortable to divert one’s gaze, to bathe in the deceptive temporary security of the suburbs, to bury your nose in your newspaper when the route of the rapid transit skirts the slums, or to keep your automobile on the well-traveled and prettified routes.\textsuperscript{176}
\end{quote}

It is noteworthy that Rabbi Lelyveld makes this statement concerning indifference to the inequality surrounding middle-class Jews in April of 1966, a full two months before Stokely Carmichael would first use the words “Black Power” during the March Against Fear, and a year

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Rabbi Lelyveld, “Excerpts from the Remarks of Rabi Arthur J. Lelyveld Fairmount Temple.”
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
before the publication of *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*.\(^{177}\) Noteworthy because Lelyveld seems to represent a set of liberal Jews who had already begun to see the danger of the middle-class before Carmichael and Hamilton’s influential book was printed.

President of the AJCongress at the time, Dr. Joachim Prinz, would echo Rabi Lelyveld’s remarks at the 1966 convention in a similar speech calling for more active Jewish participation in the Civil Rights Movement.\(^{178}\) Dr. Prinz aptly noted in his speech that there were very few Black Jews or poor Jews in which members of the Jewish community felt obligated to help due to sharing a religious doctrine.\(^{179}\) Additionally, as a result of the distance between many Jews and those Black and poor Americans in need in urban centers, the issues of those people became issues of the proverbial “other,” and therefore out of reach of the Jewish consciousness.\(^{180}\) The reason Dr. Prinz blamed on this lethargy when it came to civil rights work was simple yet striking: “We [Jews] have become a middle class group. Therein lies a great tragedy. For our participation in these areas smacks of vicariousness and lack of immediate concern for our own.”\(^{181}\) As with Rabbi Lelyveld, even before the popularization of Black Power ideology, Dr. Prinz represented Jews who were beginning to understand the consequence of having joined the

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\(^{178}\) Dr. Joachim Prinz, “Address by Dr. Joachim Prinz, President American Jewish Congress, At the AJCongress National Biennial Convention April 27-May 1, 1968 – Grossinger’s Hotel, Grossinger, N.Y.,” April or May 1968, box 12, folder, The American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History, Records of the American Jewish Congress, 3.

\(^{179}\) Ibid.

\(^{180}\) Ibid.

\(^{181}\) Ibid.
middle-class, and like Hamilton and Carmichael, saw the negative effects the middle-class had on American society.

To further emphasize Jewish agreement with Black Power on the middle-class, one need only look to two years after the 1966 National Biennial Convention when AJCongress Executive Director Will Maslow gave a report to the Biennial National Convention of the American Jewish Congress in May of 1968. A section of this report was entitled “Law and Social Action” with a sub-report on The Urban Crisis located within. In The Urban Crisis Maslow referenced the convention two years prior in which it was “… already apparent that America’s race problems could not be solved merely by eliminating practices of discrimination and segregation.” Without specifically mentioning the middle-class Maslow went on to speak of the “affluence gap” that had grown in America causing those outside of the ghetto to ignore the growing demands of Blacks in decrepit neighborhoods for widespread economic and cultural reform. In making these remarks Maslow seemed to indirectly draw upon both Black Power ideology and the ideas of men like Dr. Prinz and Rabbi Lelyveld that the middle-class only served to keep Blacks from having a seat at the table. Maslow noted, reverberating the warnings of Lelyveld and Prinz, that the “American people must be prepared to make sacrifices and to accept changes in their daily lives as we make our cities over.” The Americans Maslow referenced are surely

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183 Ibid., 19.

184 Ibid.

185 Ibid., 20.

186 Ibid.
those middle-class Americans, specifically Jews as this was an AJCongress convention, who had recently fled the inner-cities for affluent suburbs away from Black Americans. Thus, over a two-year period, the AJCongress continued to be critical of the middle-class in a very similar manner as Black Power advocates. While this critique of the middle class did not draw upon the inherent element of racial discrimination in the middle-class Hamilton and Carmichael wrote on, the writings of AJCongress leaders show a clear parallel between liberal Jewish and Black Power thought. Where liberal Jews and Black Power would differ however, was the ways in which to implement change in the face of rejecting the middle-class.

**Coalitions**

In the third chapter to their book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, entitled, “The Myth of Coalition,” Charles Hamilton and Stokley Carmichael identified three fallacies on which those who support coalitions operate under.\(^{187}\) The first fallacy was the notion that the interests of Black Americans were the same as interests of other liberal groups.\(^{188}\) The second was the idea that a politically and economically secure group could work equally on an issue with a politically and economically insecure group.\(^{189}\) The final fallacy was that coalitions could be maintained on a “. . . moral, friendly, sentimental basis; by appeals to conscience.”\(^{190}\) Hamilton and Carmichael took each of these myths in turn, outlining their major failings and explaining the reasons in which coalitions on Civil Rights work were unnecessary and in fact

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\(^{188}\) Ibid.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.

\(^{190}\) Ibid.
more harmful than productive.\textsuperscript{191} It would be unnecessary to take up each of these myths in full, however it is suffice it to say that the core of Hamilton and Carmicheal’s argument is this,

The major mistake made by exponents of the coalition theory is that they advocate alliances with groups which have never had as their central goal the revamping of the society. At bottom, those groups accept the American system and want only—if at all—to make peripheral, marginal reforms in it. Such reforms are inadequate to rid the society of racism.\textsuperscript{192}

According to Carmichael and Hamilton, the non-Black groups that had worked on Civil Rights, as well meaning and morally grounded as they might have been, were not in the work of reshaping society in a way that would fundamentally shift the treatment of Black people.\textsuperscript{193} Rather, outside groups had largely benefitted from the way society generally functioned and only worked in coalitions as long as there was some benefit in it for them.\textsuperscript{194} This idea is not without merit, as later political philosophers, like Charles Mills, would argue that whites had no need to restructure society as it was already working to benefit economically and politically.\textsuperscript{195}

Carmichael and Hamilton made clear however that they did not wish to rid the Civil Rights Movement of white people entirely, rather, they offered a four step approach to what they saw as a viable and sustainable coalition which could benefit both groups.\textsuperscript{196} The four-step approach is as follows:

\dots (a) the recognition by the parties involved of their respective self-interests; (b) the mutual belief that each party stands to benefit in terms of that self-interest from allying

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 60-84.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{195} Mills, \textit{The Racial Contract}.
\textsuperscript{196} Ture and Hamilton, \textit{Black Power: The Politics of Liberation}, 79.
with the other or others; (c) the acceptance of the fact that each party has its own independent base of power and does not depend for ultimate decision-making on a force outside itself; and (d) the realization that the coalition deals with specific and identifiable –as opposed to general and vague–goals.\(^{197}\)

Taken at face value, the criterion listed here for a viable coalition do not seem all that radical or ostentatious; Carmichael and Hamilton simply call on both parts of a coalition to be honest with themselves and each other about what they are getting out of any arrangement and to be realistic with their goals.\(^{198}\) The issue for liberal Jews involved in coalition work however, was that they did not believe they were in civil rights work for self-interest, on the contrary, many of these Jews argued that their desire to work on behalf of and with Black Americans was for purely altruistic means.

It is important to note here that many Jews saw Black Power and its attempts at turning inwards rather than focusing on coalition building and cross-racial understanding as a form of racism and Black anti-Semitism. In *Torn at the Roots*, Michael Staub notes that many view this time period as being rife with Black anti-Semitism.\(^{199}\) Specifically, Staub argues that for many Jews, “There was also the perception–unevenly applied and hotly contested–that blacks were antisemites who took out their resentments and frustrations most especially on the Jew whom they saw only as a different shade of white person.”\(^{200}\) However, evidence suggests that liberal Jews in organizations such as the AJCongress saw Black anti-Semitism as nothing more or less than the run-of-the-mill anti-Semitism Jews could come to expect from society as a whole.\(^{201}\)

\(^{197}\) Ibid., 79-80.

\(^{198}\) Ibid.


\(^{200}\) Ibid., 76.

\(^{201}\) “American Jewish Congress Resolution on Anti-Semitism: Adopted at its Biennial Convention, April 27-May 1, 1966,” in *Resolutions Adopted by the American Jewish Congress at its*
fact, in the American Jewish Congress’ “Resolution on Anti-Semitism Adopted at its Biennial Convention” in 1966, the AJCongress wrote that, “It should come as no surprise that anti-Semitism also exists in the Negro community. We have no reason to believe that it is any more widespread or virulent there than it is in the white Christian community; if anything, the evidence is to the contrary.”\(^{202}\) The fact that the AJCongress saw Black anti-Semitism as somewhat blasé, and in fact less ardent than white Christian anti-Semitism, is important because it shows that these Jews did not see Black Power and its anti-coalition stance as an anti-Semitic attempt to rid the Civil Rights Movement of Jews. On the contrary, it seems that rather than turn away from civil rights these liberal Jews would double down on their commitment to the civil rights cause.

In his speech given to the 1966 Biennial Convention of the AJCongress, Dr. Joachim Prinz included a note on the growing divide between the old and new leadership of the Civil Rights Movement.\(^{203}\) Still given before the start of the Black Power Movement, but recognizing the growing tension as a result of the slow moving process of civil rights work, Dr. Prinz wrote that a new phase was coming in the “Black Revolution.”\(^{204}\) Dr. Prinz continued his speech by recognizing the fact that new leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, leaders like the young Stokley Carmichael, now heading of SNCC, were eager to work on their own behalf without

\(^{202}\) Ibid.

\(^{203}\) Dr. Joachim Prinz, “Address by Dr. Joachim Prinz, President American Jewish Congress, 2.

\(^{204}\) Ibid.
outside help. Interestingly enough, Prinz recognized that the desire to work for oneself in the Black community was similar to the work Jewish immigrants undertook to gain their rights in America in previous decades. Regardless of seeing a parallel to past Jewish struggle however, Dr. Prinz argued that “... it has now become apparent that if we want to maintain our position in this struggle [for Black Civil Rights], our contribution can be made only in terms of our Jewishness.” It seems then that for Prinz, while Blacks may have wanted to work without the assistance of outsiders, Jews bore a higher responsibility to help regardless of any self-interest.

This staunch desire to participate in Civil Rights while recognizing that new leaders were pushing out non-Blacks permeated through AJCongress’s writings, as Jews grappled with the fact that they were no longer wanted in the struggle. One example of this can be seen in a document entitled “Economic and Social Action Draft Resolution” produced for the AJCongress New England Region’s 1966 Biennial Convention. The writers of the document acknowledged that self-help was essential to civil rights work, but also stated that “... Jewish moral and religious teachings,” prescribe Jews to work to all economic impoverishment suffered by minority groups. Additionally, in the “Community Interrelations” section of the Executive Director’s report to the 1968 Biennial National Convention of the AJCongress, Will Maslow committed to reestablishing the AJCongress Commission on Community Interrelations after a

205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid., 3.
209 Ibid., 1-2.
ten year hiatus due to the AJCongress needing to “confront the great domestic issue of our time with programs and activities to match our commitment to the concept of racial equality, economic justice and intergroup understanding.”

Thus, time and again evidence presents itself of the AJCongress’s expressing the need to help Black Americans regardless of whether those same Black Americans wanted their assistance. Actions such as reinstituting the Commission on Community Interrelations in 1968, or, as referenced in chapter two of this work, creating Project Transfer to hand Jewish owned business in ghetto areas over to Black businesspeople, indicate that liberal Jews active in groups like the AJCongress continued to participate in civil rights work regardless of Black Power rhetoric surrounding coalitions. Of course, hearing that the leaders of organizations such as SNCC no longer wanted the help of outsiders led some Jews to denounce Black Power all together, such as Theodore Bikel in his “An Open Letter to SNCC.” However, the members of the AJCongress and other liberal Jews who felt obligated participate in civil rights work continued to do so regardless of the anti-coalition rhetoric stemming from Black Power.

It is important then to place the fact that Jews were continuing to work on civil rights regardless of Black Power’s stance on coalitions in conversation with Jewish unease over their having become a middle-class community and growing weariness over assimilation as explored

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211 Other examples can be seen in Howard M. Squadron’s remarks to the 1966 Biennial Convention in which he states, “We have a huge responsibility to inform our own membership and the Jewish community generally that the proper role for Jews is not to run from the reality of equality but to stay and impress upon that reality the values that Jews have traditionally cherished.” See Howard M. Squadron, “Excerpts from the Remarks of Howard M. Squadron, Chairman Commission on Law and Social Action,” 2.


213 “American Jewish Congress: Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, October 21, 1969.”

214 Bikel, “An Open Letter to SNCC.”
previously. If these liberal minded Jews were beginning to question their role as white Americans in the face of Black Power rhetoric, it makes sense that they would continue to work on civil rights as a means of proving to Black Power ideologues that they were not a mischievous white community working with Blacks for their own gain, but an ethnic community with a similar history to Black Americans that truly wanted to help. Thus, by questioning their role as assimilated white Americans, pushing themselves out of the ambivalence that came with being middle-class, and refusing to stop work on civil rights issues, the liberal Jews presented here placed themselves outside of the white power structure Black Power critiqued in their attack on coalitions and began to see themselves as non-whites dedicated to the Black social justice cause.
Conclusion

By outlining the ways in which Black Power rhetoric regarding assimilation, the middle-class, and coalitions impacted a select group of liberal Jews active in the Civil Rights Movement, it is my hope that this paper has touched upon a larger phenomenon in the 1960s Jewish community. Specifically, the evidence presented here went to support the argument that the Black Power Movement and its ideology created a crisis of identity among liberal, politically active Jews as they reconsidered what it meant to be civil rights activists and, so-called, “white” Americans. However, while the mid-to-late 1960s and the Black Power Movement may have been the focus of this research, it is important to understand why the identity crisis among liberal Jews is important in the larger American context and is a debate that continues to this day.

Not touched upon in this thesis, but important to note, is the element of the American Jewish community which did not participate in the Civil Rights Movement and continues to maintain conservative political tendencies when it comes social justice issues. Groups in the 1960s such as the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League were largely made up of a more conservative and affluent cross-section of the American Jewish community and felt that, in the words of Michael Staub, “To be Jewish meant to be an adherent of the Jewish faith and had little or nothing to do with politics.”

Interestingly, these Jewish conservatives not only kept themselves largely out of social and political issues, but also viewed themselves as the Jews most assimilated into American society and therefore never questioned their place as white Americans. It makes sense that those Jews who refused to enter the political fray saw themselves as the most assimilated because they would have largely insulated themselves from

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216 Ibid., 54-55.
Black Power ideology and therefore protected themselves from having to confront it. Still today, there exists those Jews who have removed themselves from political questions of race and have happily accepted their status as white within the confines of the Racial Contract. This element of the American Jewish community stands in contention with the Jews I have written about here, and in many ways represent the larger American communities who have refused to recognize the cultural melting pot many pride the United States as having become.

At its core, the United States is a vast array of ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious communities. The Black and Jewish communities discussed here represent just two of these populations that interact with one another on a daily basis in towns and cities across America. Throughout American history, members of these communities have stepped out of their neighborhoods to work on issues of politics and society; the Jews researched and written about here who participated in the Civil Rights Movement represent just one such instance of this type of civil engagement. Their advocacy on behalf of the Black community faced internal turmoil when liberal, politically active Jews were forced to reconcile the ideology of the Black Power Movement with the ideology that allowed them to assimilate into American society. This thesis addresses the questions of the Jewish community during the 1960s: what happens when social justice causes are disrupted? And, what happens when Jews are faced with a sudden and drastic change in discourse, ideology, and treatment? These questions do not just apply to the liberal Jews of the America Jewish Congress and others, but to the American experience as a whole.

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217 I am reflective here of a personal experience in which, when the nexus of this thesis was presented, the idea of having to confront white privilege and consider the fact that Jews have not always been considered of the white racial category was perceived as being controversial, even by Jewish members of the audience.
The liberal Jews in the 1960s had to answer these questions and the evidence presented shows that these problems were not easy to resolve. Jews had struggled over questions of assimilation for decades, had worked to become “white,” and had joined a middle-class that many considered—and still do consider—the cornerstone of America. They had worked hard to build cross-racial coalitions and in the late 1960s had done so, but Black Power meant they were forced to reconsider their political actions. As I have argued, by this time some Jews had already recognized the flaws of joining the middle-class and white society, but for others, Black Power rhetoric present a radical change in racial discourse that disrupted the Jewish place in America. It is of course impossible to argue that the individuals I have written on speak for all liberal politically active Jews of the time; however, through the evidence presented here it is clear that the change in racial discourse Black Power created altered the ways in which many liberal Jews during the 1960s saw themselves in the racial makeup of the United States.

In his essay “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,” James Baldwin writes the following:

America’s history, her aspirations, her peculiar triumphs, her even more peculiar defeats, and her position in the world—yesterday and today—are all so profoundly and stubbornly unique that the very word “America” remains a new, almost completely undefined and extremely controversial proper noun. No one in the world seems to know exactly what it describes, not even we motley millions who call ourselves Americans.218

To this day, Jewish debate over their place in American society continues as they attempt to discover exactly what America means. Indeed, close to fifty years after the Black Power Movement Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz’s successor at Adas Israel, Rabbi Gil Steinlauf, asked his congregation “What role do we play in that injustice now that most of us live as white people in

And it is important to note that, just as a change in racial discourse in the 1960s forced Rabbi Rabinowitz to write on Jewish identity, a similar change is taking place now which influenced Rabbi Steinlauf. The growing tide of extra-judicial police killings and the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement today have caused a similar disruption in Jewish communities that the Black Power Movement caused fifty years ago. And they represent the continued struggle for both Blacks and Jews to define America.

For example, in August of 2016 a coalition calling themselves The Movement For Black Lives released a platform detailing a “Vision For Black Lives,” which included a call for American divestment from Israel’s “military industrial complex.” This call for divestment is just one example of a growing trend in Black activism taking on the Israeli Palestinian Conflict, which has caused Jews who would otherwise support the movement to withdraw their backing. And yet, as in the Civil Rights Movement, Blacks and Jews continue to find themselves to be the targets of white extremists such as Robert Doyle and Ronald Chaney III who were arrested in 2015 for attempting to bomb Black churches and Jewish temples in Virginia, acts which push Blacks and Jews to continue to work together against racial injustice. These questions, over divestment, assimilation, police violence, Black Power, the

219 Gil Steinlauf, “Jews struggled for decades to become white.


middle-class, and more, have never been answered, rather they continue to reshape themselves as
the decades pass by and America continues to define itself.

In the context of this work, the result of the current change in racial discourse is Jews like
Rabbi Steinlauf beginning to ponder the same questions his congregation did a half-century
earlier. Of course the fact that Jews are asking the same questions of themselves they were fifty
years ago may have less to do with the state of Black rights activism and more to do with the fact
that the United States has failed to answer the racial questions that have plagued it since the
founding. Fifty years after Black Power, Jews and Blacks are still the targets of violence.224 Fifty
years after Black Power, Jews are still questioning their whiteness.225 And fifty years after Black
Power, the United States has still failed to guarantee all races the rights guaranteed in the
Constitution.

Additionally, in order to build upon the arguments made in this work, further research is
warranted on other Jewish groups such as the American Jewish Committee, the anti-Defamation
League and others located outside of the Northeast region of the United States. This research can
expand into other social and political movements as well, including the growth of the so-called
‘silent majority’ under the Reagan Administration, the rise of the Tea Party in the Republican
Party surrounding the election of President Barack Obama, and the sudden rise in populism
leading to the election of Donald Trump. These research topics, while vastly different from the
one presented in this paper, all touch upon the same inherent question of what happens when
political and social discourses are drastically interrupted. The Black Lives Matter movement and
the election of Donald Trump to President of the United States represent a change in discourse

224 Ibid.
225 Gil Steinlauf, “Jews struggled for decades to become white.
eerily similar to that which took place during the Black Power Movement and the rise of Reagan conservatism.

The Black Power Movement and the response by liberal Jewish Americans serve as just one example of the American experience of social change. This is an experience that will undoubtedly continue to affect the United States and necessitates more research into how communities can work together to navigate identity and racial politics as the country moves towards its next fifty years of social and political evolution.
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