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## Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America by Jonathan Kaufman

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## BOOK REVIEW

MARGOT FRIEDMAN\*

**BROKEN ALLIANCE: THE TURBULENT TIMES BETWEEN BLACKS AND JEWS IN AMERICA.** By JONATHAN KAUFMAN. New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1988. Pp. 311.

When Jesse Jackson first ran for president in 1984, he created hope and a renewed interest in the electoral process for Blacks and disenfranchised people across the nation. At the same time, Jackson angered many Jews by calling New York "Hymie-town" and refusing to repudiate Louis Farrakhan, a Muslim leader who called Hitler a "great man" and Judaism "a dirty religion." The antagonism between Blacks and Jews in 1984 seems far removed from 1964, the year that well over half the civil rights workers heading south to register Black voters were Jewish.<sup>1</sup> That summer, two Jews and a Black man went to Philadelphia, Mississippi to register voters and were murdered by local officials. Their names — Michael Schwerner, James Earl Chaney and Andrew Goodman — have become shorthand for the strength of the alliance between Blacks and Jews against the dominant culture during the civil rights era.

The Black-Jewish coalition of the 1960s achieved lasting civil rights reform and served as a model for interracial cooperation. Interactions between Black and Jewish leaders in the 1980s, however, have been marked by anger and bitterness.<sup>2</sup> The change from allies to enemies requires an explanation. In *Broken Alliance*, Jonathan Kaufman traces the history of Black-Jewish relations, the cooperation during the civil rights movement and the reasons for the dissolution of the alliance in the 1980s.

Kaufman is a *Boston Globe* reporter who has written extensively on minority issues. In 1984, he was co-winner of a Pulitzer Prize for articles on racism and job discrimination in Boston. In *Broken Alliance*, Kaufman examines the involvement of Jews in the civil

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<sup>1</sup> J. KAUFMAN, *BROKEN ALLIANCE* 19 (1988) (hereinafter KAUFMAN).

<sup>2</sup> For example, when Jesse Jackson campaigned for the presidency in New York in 1988, Mayor Koch met him with scathing remarks. Koch stated that Jews would be "crazy" to vote for Jackson. Many Black leaders felt that the remarks went beyond political disagreement and indicated deep resentment. See *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 1988, at 11, col. 1.

rights movement. In the past few years, many authors have written about this era, yet a discussion of the role of Jews has been sorely absent.<sup>3</sup> Authors have failed to recognize the support of Jews because they perceive the alliance in terms of Black-white cooperation, rather than Black-Jewish. For example, in *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, David Garrow refers to Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman as an “inter-racial team,” ignoring Schwerner and Goodman’s identity as Jews.<sup>4</sup>

Other writers have diminished or distorted the roles of Jews in the movement. In *And We Are Not Saved*, Derrick Bell’s fictionalized account of the civil rights movement, the author provides only one Jewish character — the son of an immigrant tailor who becomes a billionaire and pays reparations to the Black underclass to place them in the economic position they would have achieved in the absence of slavery and racism.<sup>5</sup> Bell’s use of the word “reparations” seems to reflect the sentiment in some parts of the Black community that Jews have harmed Blacks and owe them amends.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Kaufman demonstrates that Jews contributed vast amounts of time, money and energy to the civil rights movement. Jewish students sat-in at lunch counters and registered voters. Jewish lawyers advised King and bailed demonstrators out of jail. By the mid-1960s, Jewish donations made up three-quarters of the contributions supporting the major civil rights organizations.<sup>7</sup> *Broken Alliance* documents and analyzes the impact of Jewish contributions, filling a void in the literature on the civil rights movement.

Kaufman chose a serial biography method for the book, telling stories from the lives of seven activists. This method reveals the intensely personal nature of the movement and illuminates “why this alliance seemed to touch people so deeply, create so much hope, and produce such anger and bitterness as it collapsed.”<sup>8</sup> Kaufman examines the lives of three Blacks: Paul Parks, an engineer and advisor to Martin Luther King; Rhody McCoy, the head of a minority school district in New York in the late 1960s; and Donna

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g., D. BELL, *AND WE ARE NOT SAVED: THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR RACIAL JUSTICE* (1987); J. WILLIAMS, *EYES ON THE PRIZE: AMERICA’S CIVIL RIGHTS YEARS, 1954–1965* (1987); D. GARROW, *BEARING THE CROSS: MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE* (1986) (1988 Pulitzer Prize winner).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 342.

<sup>5</sup> D. BELL, *AND WE ARE NOT SAVED* 124–27 (1987).

<sup>6</sup> See *BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY* 1167 (5th ed. 1983) (“Reparations” is defined as “[p]ayment for injury; redress for a wrong done”).

<sup>7</sup> KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1, at 66.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 4.

Brazil, a young campaign worker for Jesse Jackson and organizer of the 1983 March on Washington. Kaufman chronicles the lives of four Jews: Jack Greenberg, the lawyer who succeeded Thurgood Marshall as president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; Roz and Bernie Ebstein, a liberal couple whose commitment to raising children in an integrated neighborhood was tested; and Martin Peretz, editor and publisher of the *New Republic*.

Through each case study Kaufman makes an important point about the development and deterioration of Black-Jewish relations. The profiles of Paul Parks and Rhody McCoy, for example, represent the moderate and radical arms of the civil rights movement, respectively. Paul Parks' story about fighting World War II in a segregated company shows the basis for the alliance, the common oppression of Blacks and Jews. The Black platoon, generally given the least desirable assignments, was sent to Dachau to remove dead bodies. A rabbi emerged from the barracks and Parks asked him what the Jews did to anger the Germans. The rabbi said, "Nothing. They were killed because they were Jews." Parks understood this. He had seen people lynched because they were Black.<sup>9</sup> After the army, Parks maintained friendships with Jews and worked with King for integration.

While Parks was traveling to the 1963 March on Washington to link arms with whites and sing "We Shall Overcome," Rhody McCoy attended Malcolm X's lectures. Malcolm X told his audiences that whites were evil and encouraged Blacks to seize control over their own neighborhoods, stores and lives. McCoy, a teacher and administrator, had always felt that Jews controlled the public school system in New York. In the fall of 1967, he was named the first Black head of a school district. McCoy fired Jewish teachers and replaced them with Black militants. He believed any alliance between Blacks and Jews would undermine his goal of "black control over black lives."<sup>10</sup> The profile of Rhody McCoy is informative and highlights what may be the central dynamic between Blacks and Jews.<sup>11</sup> The goal of the Black Power movement, self-determination, is admirable. Some leaders in this movement, however, seem to hold a special animus for Jews.

Kaufman uses the Ebsteins, the family in the following chapter, to examine the commitment of Jewish liberals. Like Parks, the Eb-

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 52.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 54.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Washington Monthly*, Nov. 1988, at 53, col. 1.

steins' commitment was born during the Holocaust. Bernie Epstein escaped Germany after the Nazis smashed the windows of Jewish stores and desecrated synagogues during Kristallnacht. Out of a moral commitment to integration, the couple pledged to stay in their Chicago neighborhood as poor Black families moved in. The Ebsteins marched with King after many Jews had moved to the suburbs, disillusioned with the movement. Ultimately, however, they were driven out of the city by poor schools and violent crime. Their's is perhaps the saddest story in the book, pointing out the difficulty of living by one's ideals.

The personal stories explain why everyone in the conflict felt as they did. Kaufman is careful to illuminate rather than re-ignite the controversy. In addition, Kaufman interweaves glimpses of news events and excerpts from speeches, novels, and songs that reflect the times. These include: Ku Klux Klan literature; journal notes of Alice Walker; a Jewish man's memory of the first time he saw Jackie Robinson play; and even a Lenny Bruce comedy routine. The inclusion of these materials provides a historical and social context for the biographies. They also demonstrate that the union between art and life was especially intimate during this period. Kaufman's reliance on anecdotal evidence, however, prevents *Broken Alliance* from being a comprehensive look at Blacks and Jews in America, a weakness the author concedes in the introduction.

Substantively, Kaufman makes the important point that the alliance was not a natural one, as it has often been described. American Jews have a relatively short tradition of involvement in liberal causes. Jews remained aloof from mass movements because history in the fertile crescent and in Europe had shown that these movements often turned on them. Jews were divided, for example, on the issue of slavery. In the 1880s and '90s, Jewish immigrants came to America, bringing socialism with them. Their philosophical commitment to the working class led to calls for integration. Around the same time, the Reform Movement of Judaism was founded with social justice as part of its creed. The Ku Klux Klan and the other white supremacist groups that rose in the early and mid-1900s targeted both Blacks and Jews. By the early 1960s, the basis for alliance between Blacks and Jews had been formed.

Kaufman states that the interests of Blacks and Jews did not converge but came into conflict in the 1970s. The partnership of the previous decade had left Blacks feeling dominated and controlled and Jews attacked and unappreciated. After King's death, the civil rights movement shifted toward Black militarism. Blacks

grew suspicious of Jews who they believed impeded their progress while claiming to help. They resented the paternalism of the 1950s and '60s. Anti-Semitism grew and Black leaders did not denounce it.<sup>12</sup> Blacks criticized U.S. policy in the Middle East and advocated negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). They resented Israel for trading with South Africa, even though the U.S. and Arab nations also traded with South Africa. Ignoring and dismissing the historical roots of Jewish fears, Blacks grew frustrated with Jews who continued to feel insecure even though they had succeeded in America.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, Jews abandoned the movement. Jews, like most whites, failed to understand what it was like to be Black in America. Jews were shaken by the Black Power movement even though it resembled their own commitment to Zionism. In the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, support for Israel supplanted concern for civil rights. The criticism of Israel reminded Jews that they were still vulnerable to attack. Blacks made affirmative action a central part of their agenda while many Jews believed in a society based on merit. In addition, the inflation of the 1970s made individuals more concerned about their own economic survival. Stuart Eizenstat, an assistant to President Carter, observed that it was as though Blacks and Jews had staked out each other's most sensitive spot and decided to attack it.<sup>14</sup>

Critics argue that the alliance dissolved because it was never as strong as it appeared to be.<sup>15</sup> They feel that the dissolution of the alliance was inevitable. As Jews became wealthier, many Blacks started to believe that they were simply another group of whites exploiting them.<sup>16</sup> Kaufman agrees that many Jews were motivated by their own agenda. Jews, emerging from the decimation of the Second World War and grappling with continuing anti-Semitism,

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<sup>12</sup> This dynamic exists today. A Jewish reporter asked Jesse Jackson why he hadn't condemned the anti-Semitism of an aide to Chicago Mayor Eugene Sawyer, who claimed that Jewish doctors were injecting the AIDS virus into Blacks. Jackson bristled at the question, responding, "What am I, the designated Negro? I'm not the mayor of Chicago, and it's not my job to intervene in every local problem." The journalist reminded Jackson that he frequently intervened in local problems in Chicago and elsewhere. See *The Washington Monthly*, Nov. 1988, at 51, col. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Jews in Spain had been the most wealthy and influential group in Europe before the Inquisition. Jews in Germany had succeeded economically until the Holocaust. See KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1, 274.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 244.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 275.

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1988, at 25, col. 3.

supported a political agenda that would further their success in America: a society which would not make distinctions based on race or religion. "But," Kaufman asserts, "to write off the period of [B]lack-Jewish cooperation and the feelings it stirred as a cynical manipulation or [a] sociological aberration is to miss something vital . . . about the spirit and the hope that infused the country and the civil rights movement in the early 1960s."<sup>17</sup> He states the Jewish support was rooted in love and idealism as much as politics and self-interest.

Kaufman correctly characterizes the Black-Jewish alliance of the 1960s as part of the massive social change of that decade. Yet, his narrow focus on lost idealism ignores the other dynamics at work in the conflict. While he carefully analyzes the political differences between Blacks and Jews, he does not examine equally important class differences.<sup>18</sup> Critics argue that the alliance of the early 1960s was in fact an alliance between middle-class Blacks and middle-class Jews.<sup>19</sup> As younger, lower-class Blacks entered the movement, Black Power became more important, making Jews uncomfortable and causing them to leave the movement. Similarly, the author misses some important points about foreign affairs. He does not explore the reasons behind Black support for Arab states and the PLO. Nor does he mention Jews' indifference to the suffering of Palestinians.<sup>20</sup>

Comparing the 1960s to the 1980s has become a cottage industry for ex-radicals and trendwatchers. Commentators uniformly agree that the 1980s has brought a shift in public attitudes, reflected in students who are committed to self-interest and materialism, rather than to causes. History shows, however, that periods of activism and complacency are cyclical, which means that the coalition between Blacks and Jews may be repaired. Indeed, some Jewish commentators have argued that the alliance must be revived.<sup>21</sup> For example, relatives of the three civil rights workers who were killed in Mississippi recently met for the first time in Boston.<sup>22</sup> They spoke enthusiastically about the need to "rekindle the spark of idealism and dedication" to the ideals of social and racial justice.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1, at 276.

<sup>18</sup> New York Times, Sept. 29, 1988, at 25, col. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> See The Washington Monthly, Nov. 1988, at 52, col. 2.

<sup>21</sup> See *id.* at 54, col. 2 (Jonathan Alter, Senior Writer at Newsweek).

<sup>22</sup> Boston Globe, Apr. 11, 1989, at 21, col. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

The reasons that Jews believe that the alliance must be rebuilt seem patronizing, the very attitude credited with bringing about the dissolution of the alliance of the 1960s. Jewish writers have stated that the issue of the underclass is not a Black problem but a national emergency which cannot be solved without the help of whites — contrary to what some Blacks and white conservatives think. While Jews are not the only whites who care about the underclass, they have comprised a significant number of the activists who have been committed to this issue.<sup>24</sup> Kaufman notes that the repair of the union does not seem possible until Jesse Jackson passes from the political scene.<sup>25</sup> He inspires too much fear and animosity from Jews who are convinced that his efforts to reach out to them are insincere. Like Moses, Jackson may lead his people out of the desert but may be locked out of the promised land himself. Further, Kaufman suggests that the alliance cannot be repaired as long as the desire for reconciliation is one-sided. While Jews often express nostalgia for the alliance, Blacks do not.<sup>26</sup>

Even if there is not a second wave of cooperation between Blacks and Jews, other groups will continue to come together for shared agenda. The important question will arise again: how can two groups with a common purpose work together without building resentment on both sides? While *Broken Alliance* documents what went wrong in the 1960s and '70s, it provides little guidance about building lasting coalitions in the future. Perhaps because Kaufman is a journalist, he limits himself to reporting the facts rather than proposing solutions.

*Broken Alliance* is an interesting and informative work. Kaufman negotiates the minefield of Black-Jewish relations bravely and skillfully. As a Jew writing about this subject, he opens himself up to charges of bias, insensitivity and revisionism.<sup>27</sup> Yet, he has turned out a thoughtful and even-handed piece. This book is an important addition to the literature on the civil rights movement.

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<sup>24</sup> See *The Washington Monthly*, Nov. 1988, at 54, col. 2.

<sup>25</sup> KAUFMAN, *supra* note 1, at 279.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Tony Brown's Journal: Interview with Jonathan Kaufman* (PBS television broadcast, February 1989).