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“Journey Through a Civil Rights Exhibit”

How does Jewish discrimination and the discrimination of Blacks connect? Today I am venturing through the Civil Rights Era for a project examining the cycle of discrimination in African American communities. I happened to come across several online exhibits, therefore I do not have to leave my house in order to complete the assignment, so that is a win in my book. As I was scrolling through the several exhibits one caught my eye, and made me jump out my seat when I simply read the title: “Black and Jewish Discrimination: The Never Ending Cycle of Self Interests.” The title was bolded above the description of what the exhibit entailed. As a Jewish male I was shocked and confused since the school systems solely focus on African Americans during the Civil Right Era, rather than other minority groups. In school we only learn about the Holocaust and McCarthyism in connection to Jews whereas we only learn about slavery and the Civil Rights Movement in connection to African Americans. But the title mentions a never ending cycle of self interests in relation to discrimination in Blacks and Jews, so were both minority groups working together for their benefit? I thought the Civil Rights Movement was straightforward but in actuality there is still plenty to uncover and explore. Maybe there is more to history that just is not taught in school due to misconceptions.

Beneath the title was a description outlining what is expected to be viewed by the viewer. While reading the description my eyebrows raised from time to time out of disbelief that a

“Black-Jewish relationship” ever existed. I understand that it is true that both minority groups faced discrimination, but were both groups persecuted with the same methods? As I click on the blue hyperlink which took me to the next page I noticed a huge black and white photograph that read “We Want White Tenants In Our White Community.” If the curator of the exhibit wanted to connect housing discrimination for Jews and Blacks, why did he use a sign that singled out only people of color? During this time period it is known that the Jewish population was dominantly White so to me this picture is really out of place. As my eyes gazed down to the caption I was in awe in the curator’s ability to connect the picture to the Jews. By connecting both Blacks and Jews to housing discrimination it opens the realm of possibility of a relationship to form. The date of the photograph read 1942, which means Jews and Blacks were persecuted during World War II before the Civil Rights Era. So when did they form their unique relationship? The next image of Housing discrimination protests makes me infer that a simple connection along the lines of persecution united two groups in order to promote freedom and equality for all.

From the next page in the exhibit it shows that the “Black-Jewish relationship” officially formed during the 1960s. When I read that a Jewish girl put her whole life on hold in order to help benefit a whole community a tear dripped down my cheek. The girl’s name was Heather Booth and she achieved a lot, by playing guitar for heroes of the Civil Rights Movement and also participating in sit-ins and Freedom Rides. However, I hear about Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks every time I learn about the Civil Rights Movement but nothing about Heather Booth. She is completely left out of the history books which in my opinion is wrong. She done so much but gets little appreciation. I would have not learned who Heather Booth was without this exhibit, and there is still more to uncover about this time period. I have not been this excited about learning in a long time and there was no stopping myself from learning more.

I pressed the next slide faster than a lion chasing after his prey but what I witnessed next left me speechless. Jews were walking alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma. The shock left my jaw touching the carpeted floor of my bedroom, because in the historical detailing of Selma there are no mentions of Jews. For example, in the movie “Selma” there are only African Americans marching. It touched my heart that Jews took risks during the Civil Rights Movement. Most people during this time would be scared to align themselves with African Americans let alone participate in their events. Selma was known as “Bloody Sunday” proving that marches like the one shown in the exhibit had terrible consequences. The Jewish population was brave to risk their livelihood for others, I am proud to part of that community.

Community was vital for the Jewish contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. The curator provided a very lengthy audio transcript instead of the audio which I assume means he probably could not download or find the audio clip, but I admire his tenacity because the whole transcript was needed to comprehend the Jew’s involvement. The Speech made by Rabbi Joachim Prinz’s at the March on Washington, 1963 explicitly states that the biggest problem in America is silence rather than bigotry and hate. He wants to unite America by bringing a sense of identification and solidarity of America as a whole rather than a division of groups. I was amazed by how the Rabbi linked the Jewish struggles in Europe to the African American struggles in America. When studying Jewish history in Hebrew school I never saw the connection to the Civil Rights Movement, I solely saw it as a singular history rather than a complex structure. Based on the speech it seems like the “Black-Jewish relationship was a strong one. But I spoke to soon, since the next part of exhibit reads “The Start of Deterioration.”

By solely looking at the image I did not see what importance it displayed in the exhibit and I thought the curator is simply distracting the viewer from the focus of the exhibit. Little did

I know is that the picture of “An African man in a suit...” was used as a symbol for wealth or high economic status in society. This part of the exhibit saddened me because the strong relationship between Jews and Blacks was too good to be true. Jews did make strides to help the advancement of Blacks in society but in reality the Jews continued to outperform economically. Apparently the Jewish population owned 90 percent of the businesses in African American communities and that African Americans were unable to change their social class. This was only possible since Jews were no longer persecuted by the American public. This sickens my stomach that the Jews used the Blacks for their own personal gain rather than helped them advance. I have to take a step back because it must be a misunderstanding. It is too early to judge their actions and I bet the Jewish population did not plan on this happening. However, it did happen and African Americans felt betrayed by the Jews without hearing their perspectives.

The betrayal never ended. As I progress towards the end of the exhibit I notice the words “Anti-Semitism” and as a Jew the sight of those words make me cringe. According to this page, African Americans shifted their sympathy from Israel to Palestine at the same time of the Six-Day War. That war was planned to rid Israel from existence to take away the Jews’ only sanctuary. I would have thought that African Americans would empathize with the Jews since they also experience enslavement by a country. In the image it shows Malcolm X smiling or laughing with the leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The formation of this relationship shifted Blacks’ focus to color rather than experience in regards to the “Black- Jewish relationship.” African Americans felt that they were not advancing since their only partners were White, so they started to focus on persecuted people of color around the globe such as in Palestine and in Africa. I am surprised that this shift would create anti-Semitic behavior but maybe that is how the Jews perceived the actions attributed with supporting Palestinians at the

time of the Six Day War. I was disappointed that the presence of anti-Semitism reinforced Jewish racism towards Blacks. But sometimes the common response against bigotry and hatred is reflected bigotry and hatred.

Finally, I have reached the end of the exhibit and the conclusion that the curator wanted me to take away was that the reflected bigotry and hatred created a conflict or war between Blacks and Jews. The last image the curator wants me to take away is a “Time” magazine cover from 1969 entitled Black V. Jew. Their relationship barely lasted a decade but it was only formed in the first place on the basis of self-interest. However, when one group continues to outperforms the other economically it generates distrust. I guess distrust and betrayal are linked because the relationship only deteriorated due to the respective groups feeling betrayed by the other. It is surprising that even back in the 1960s people still failed to view others’ perspectives and maybe if they did they would not believe that their interests were being threatened.

As I was about to log out of the online exhibit, I returned to the start to see the connection between the last slide. At first glance at the title I only notice Black and Jewish next to each other and I failed to comprehend the whole title. The curator wanted to point out that discrimination is created by self-interests being threatened rather than fear. Although, Blacks and Jews both faced similar forms of discrimination they ended up discriminating themselves rather than progressing forward. I need to tell my friends all about this exhibit, they are all missing an essential aspect of the Civil Rights Era. History in schools are the simplified or condensed versions rather than the complex inter-relationships of everyone involved. Before viewing this exhibit, I thought African Americans were the main contributors to the Civil Rights Movement and some Whites helped out. However, in actuality Jews played a significant role as well. The main takeaway of this exhibit is to not believe everything you learn about history in school.