

Color and Culture in Israel

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Before I went to Israel in 1973 as a fellow of the Ford Foundation I had heard many words used to describe Israel as a nation. Some of the most frequently used were "neocolonialist," "expansionist," "imperialist," and "racist." The Israelis were described as "arrogant," "pushy," "cold," and "racist."

Usually when these terms were tossed around I was in the middle of a heavy "rap" with those of my students who described themselves as of the New Left or with blacks who claimed to be militant. Invariably my ears perked up, and I became keenly attentive when I heard the word "racist." For years this reaction had been as automatic to me as salivation at the smell of good food, a result of being black in America for over thirty years. As time went on, it became increasingly important for several reasons for me to look into alleged Israeli racism.

Ever since I can remember I have watched, studied, and lived among Jewish people. From the days of my youth when we would sit in our hot little Baptist church singing about Moses, Jacob, the River Jordan, and the Children of Israel, the Jewish experience often served as a surrogate identity for me. Ignoring all of the fundamental historical, psychological, and sociocultural differences between the experiences of Jews and Afro-Americans, I chose to make endless comparisons. When we spoke of "self-determination" in the 1960's, I thought about "auto-emancipation." When people talked about slavery, I thought about us and them. Talk of hated and persecuted groups who clawed their way out of poverty and desolation made me think of Jews and Afro-Americans—how far they had gone, how far we must go, and what both groups lost in their struggles. Although trying to compare

Zionism and black nationalism was difficult, I tried anyway. Even though we did not have any land to return to, promised or otherwise, I felt that we needed a homeland just as the Jews did. I also compared Zionism and Pan-Africanism. Perhaps we could reestablish links with the mother continent, find our roots and a place to be free.

When Israel became a state in 1948, I again engaged in selective perception. The historical, political, and military aspects of the establishment and the survival of the state interested me, but as a social scientist I was primarily interested in the sociocultural dynamics within the Israeli society. Deep down I again identified with the Jewish experience and coveted their state, their "turf." I had concluded that at this stage in world affairs all people must have a place, a place to be, to exist, and that nationalism, for better or worse, was "in" now. Afro-Americans also needed a place where we would no longer be subject to the whims of a ruling majority. I therefore saw the establishment of the State of Israel as some sort of symbol, a plateau on top of which rested independence and autonomy. It did not matter that independence and autonomy did not really exist among the nations of the world. The illusion of having them, I thought, brought dignity, hope, and strength. But what else happens when people long oppressed finally throw off the shackles? Do they invariably become oppressors? These were the questions that kept cropping up in my thoughts as I set out to learn more about Israeli "racism."

Separating color prejudice from other prejudices is difficult to do in America. When one hears the term "racism" in America, he usually thinks of black/white relations. One is conditioned to think of practically everything in terms of color, from who sits on the Supreme Court to what group commits the most rapes. Color consciousness permeates every aspect of life in America. As a result of my own conditioning, once I began to look into the

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conflicts within the Israeli society I assumed that there existed a distinct color prejudice, and that the color bar must be between "white" Jews and "dark" Arabs. I carefully considered the issue of race, looking up "Semite" as I tried to find a racial distinction between Arabs and Jews and to determine why I should expect to find that Arabs are darker. My initial investigations were complicated by the emergence of the Black Panther party in Israel. There were charges of racism and discrimination by Ashkenazi, or "white" Jews, against Sephardic, or "black" Jews. Because this fit into my concept of the oneness of prejudice and color, I began to look into what is known about the Falashas, the Ethiopians who profess to be Jews. Surely they must be the Black Panthers. I was informed that the vast majority of the members of the Panthers had come from North Africa, not Ethiopia, and that these North African Jews were also referred to as "Oriental."

Rather confused, I left for Israel to study the assimilation problems experienced by the Moroccan Jews. What was the situation there, and how would I be treated? I hoped that the Israelis had not yet instituted color prejudice; I was afraid that they might have.

I arrived in Israel on September 13, 1973. Not long after, I heard people using the word "gingi," and soon learned that this was the nickname for redheads. Israelis told me that they have *chutzpah* and do not hesitate to call people by a nickname, whether it refers to that person's size, baldness, coloring, or whatever. The first time someone called me "Cushie," the blood rushed to my face and my heart must have skipped several beats. It seemed to have brought to an abrupt end a period of anonymity and peace the likes of which I had never experienced. Until the youngster pulled at his mother's arm saying in great excitement, "Mother, mother, look, Cushie!" I had enjoyed feeling like a citizen of the world as I walked through the Old City of Jerusalem among people of all nations and religions. When asked where I was from, if I spoke French or Spanish, and when Israelis spoke to me in fluent Hebrew, I was incredulous. Just who did they think I was? In America there had never been any question as to who I was or where I came from. My black skin functioned like a signal in America, not unlike the star the Jews had to wear during the war, I thought. The signal set off a wide range of hatreds, expectations, and overt reactions. Many Israelis seemed not to know that I was Afro-American; much less what that implies in terms of behavior, beliefs, and worth. What then is the exact meaning of Cushie? I must have asked scores of people during my fourteen-month stay in Israel: first, what it meant, second, if it carried a negative connotation. I was told that there is no other word in Hebrew for a black person, and of course there is no negative connotation. In biblical times what is now Ethiopia was named "Cush," and the inhabitants were called "Cushim." They also said that there is some negative connotation when Yiddish speakers refer to blacks as *schwartz*, but that only came from the un-

educated. One rarely hears that now. There were a few who said yes, there was something pejorative about the term, but they were usually either shouted down by the others in the room or dismissed as half-wits. The vast majority repeatedly assured me that I was making myself unduly uncomfortable by becoming defensive and irritated when I heard the term. However, I could not overcome the feelings, and I reacted to "Cushie" almost as I react to "nigger."

I was playing tennis at the YMCA in Jerusalem when I heard a young boy call to me and ask if I would give him a ball. I continued to play until he called, "Cushie, Cushie." Suddenly I felt that I'd had enough, and I wheeled around and shouted at him in Hebrew that it was improper and ugly for him to call me Cushie. He appeared to be so stunned by my attack that he froze in his tracks and gazed at me in disbelief. He then pointed to his suntanned arm and said: "But I, too, am a Cushie." I began to hear parents use Cushie to describe their darker children, and adults and children use it to refer to their very close friends. It was time, I decided, to take a closer look at the sources of some of the conflicts within Israeli society so I could get a clearer picture of just where color prejudice fit into the hierarchy. The deeper I looked, the more I became convinced that color was not, in fact, the cause of intergroup conflicts in Israel.

There existed a clash of cultures between Israeli Jews and Arabs. This clash, along with the years-long military and religiopolitical struggle between them, set them apart, not color. Cultural differences also set Jews apart from other Jews far more than any other factor. I was intrigued by heated discussions about the dominance of the veterans over the new immigrants, and the tyranny of the religious minority over the secular majority. Yet none of these discussions posed fundamental, far-reaching questions about the State's current status and the prognosis for its future as did those concerning cultural differences. These discussions often started with rather lighthearted comments on the characteristics of various groups, and evolved into serious dialogues on topics like discrimination, intermarriage, possible recurrence of urban riots, and general widespread inequality in jobs, education, and housing. Invariably these exchanges dealt with which group thought itself superior to the others, and how the manifestation of this feeling of superiority affected group interaction. There was a great deal of controversy and some hostility, but it became increasingly clear to me that in the final analysis it is one's culture that must stand inspection in Israel, not his color or his race.

It seemed to me that in all probability, until a new Israeli culture evolves, and second- and third-generation "sabras" (Israeli-born) become parents, people will wear the status of the culture of their "old country" as I wear my black skin in America. But is it the same? Following discussions with members of the

Black Panther party, who seemed to think that their situation in Israel is exactly the same as that of blacks in America, I set about the task of attempting to discover fundamental differences between color/race prejudice and culture/ethnic group prejudice, and what happens when the two merge.

One can forsake his own culture in order to conform to another that he perceives to be more acceptable, prestigious, or worthy. Through a complete transformation of behavior, values, beliefs, and lifestyle a person can comfortably move into another culture, for better or worse. One can lose the stigma of the "backward" culture through this metamorphosis. Or one can choose to live in two cultures, to be bicultural, and move furtively between the two. Finally, it is possible for a person to create an amalgamation of two cultures by selectively adopting various aspects of the "other" culture while retaining those aspects of his own that he deems important to him.

One cannot remove the stigma attached to one's color. The legal segregation that existed in America until very recently and the doctrine of "separate but equal" were both based on the concept of the inferiority of blacks, people with black skin. Culture prejudice was an effect of color prejudice. I was expected to act a certain way because I was black, not because my culture was "primitive." My culture was primitive because I was black. I was carefully watched when I shopped in department stores because I was black, and blacks steal. I was promiscuous, loud, or lazy because I was black. I too could take on another culture and win the approval of my refined fellows, but my chronic ailment, my blackness, would always be there as a symbol of my innate inferiority, and as a warning that I might, at any moment, slip back into "acting black."

I thought about these distinctions between color and culture prejudice and tried to discuss them with several Israelis. The vast majority seemed not to understand the concept of color prejudice. So I proceeded to enjoy my stay, without my black coat. I went into department stores and thought only of opening my purse so it could be checked for weapons. If I was being watched, I noticed that others were too, and I assumed that something was amiss, not that I was seen as someone particularly prone to shoplifting. I learned to shove in line, argue for my rights, and turn off flirts without feeling as though I had stepped out of my "place." I felt free, strong, and human. Though I attracted some attention and/or

curiosity now and then, I generally felt quite ordinary, a wonderful feeling.

During the spring of 1974 I became friendly with a young Falasha couple. The wife had come to Israel from Ethiopia when she was only eight years old. She was strongly Zionist. Her husband had come less than five years before, and he felt ostracized and hostile. As I talked to him about his life in Israel as a black; the fears I had come with and which I had laid to rest came back into my consciousness. He stated that he is always stared at, called "Cushie," and generally treated like an intruder in Israel. He refuses to eat in the dining area at his army post because no one will sit by or associate with him. "Perhaps we were poor in Ethiopia, but we were not gawked at and hated," he stated. His wife suggested that his feelings of being persecuted were a product of his personal insecurities. He was not to be denied. "These whites just can't accept the fact that I, a black man, can be a Jew equal to themselves. They hate me because I'm black!" It was his firm belief that the debate over whether or not Falasha Jews should be brought to Israel, and if they will have to convert once they do come, is a smoke screen, a convenient way to delay indefinitely the influx of blacks, who, he thinks, are viewed as "monkeys" by other Israelis.

About two months before I left Israel I traveled to a development town in the Negev Desert, where I visited with a group of American blacks who call themselves "The Original Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem." They claim that they, not the "European transplants" who are now in power in Israel, are the descendants of the Patriarchs. The land of Israel was promised to them. Their ideology does not concern me here; their presence in Israel, and their blackness, does. In the same town I observed several Jews from India whose skin is extremely dark. On April 10, 1975, an unexpected announcement came from Israel; an interministerial cabinet committee gave the Falashas formal recognition as Jews under Israeli law. A large portion of the 25,000 Falashas may soon emigrate to Israel.

So the elements are there. Israel, the alive and dynamic nation with the overabundance of political, economic, and military problems, can add to an already widespread practice of cultural bias the cancerous, probably incurable, disease of color prejudice. It is my personal hope that the Israelis don't fall victim to it. Though some nations have survived and flourished in spite of race and color prejudice and hatred, there can be little doubt that their potential was greatly diminished by this scourge.