

Black and Jewish Philadelphians must rebuild an essential alliance

Our communities do not always understand each other, but discussions at the Atlanta Summit of Black Pastors and Rabbis highlighted our commitment to building stronger relationships.

By Geri Newburge and Eric Yanoff, For The Inquirer

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Black and Jewish communities in America share a long history of supporting each other against hate and discrimination.

Together, our people helped advance laws that challenged discrimination in housing, employment, and education. Together, we supported initiatives that helped move our country closer to its highest ideals.

But in recent years, the relationship between the Black and Jewish communities has become strained, even as antisemitism and racism threaten us all.

That is why the two of us - each a rabbi from the Main Line - recently went to Georgia, along with dozens of clergy from across the country, for the Atlanta Summit of Black Pastors and Rabbis. We gathered at the Temple, Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the King Center, locations that made us recall the accomplishments and the sacrifices of the Black-Jewish alliance. We came to explore what is required to rebuild the partnership now.

As we experienced firsthand, the Black and Jewish communities do not always understand each other. Views on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), Zionism, racial justice, power, and vulnerability can contrast sharply based on our personal experiences. But we were able to speak candidly about the times our communities had felt unseen or abandoned by each other.

One exchange brought those differences into focus.

Black participants described economic precarity following federal workforce cuts associated with the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and attacks on DEI, particularly for Black women. Jewish participants spoke, in turn, of social precarity amid rising antisemitism. Hearing both made our shared responsibility clearer.

Those conversations led to the understanding that Black and Jewish Americans need an agreement against abandonment. It is a simple but demanding idea: When your community is threatened, ours will not disappear. When disagreement becomes painful, we will not walk away. We will listen, speak honestly, and doggedly refuse to give up on our relationships.

That does not mean we will see eye to eye on every issue. It means we will have the commitment to hear hard truths without turning disagreement into disdain.

Speakers like civil rights organizer Eric Ward helped us to understand how the challenges are interconnected. As he explained, many people understand antisemitism to just be the hatred of Jews, but in reality, it is also a conspiracy theory about how society works. Because antisemitic conspiracy theories ignore the real roots of societal issues - such as socioeconomic inequality and structural oppression - and instead focus on tropes and pat narratives, they help sustain racism and authoritarianism as well, creating a toxic blend that threatens both Black and Jewish communities.

The comments from Black Jews in attendance were, perhaps, most illuminating. Because they sometimes experience racism in Jewish spaces and antisemitism in Black spaces, their lives counter the perception of a neat division between "our community" and "theirs." With their unique experiences, their voices must be central to the work ahead.

Another speaker, political commentator Van Jones, cautioned that the alliance we are building cannot simply recreate the one from the 1960s. Back then, Jews were still reeling from the direct memory of the Holocaust, while Black Americans were still living under the restrictions of Jim Crow. That alliance grew from shared vulnerability, but the next iteration must harness the diverse strengths each community possesses today.

Jones invoked the image of a relay runner receiving and passing a baton. Honoring the generation that came before, he said, means accepting responsibility for the next leg of the race.

For us, that work begins right here in Greater Philadelphia.

We returned home committed to building and securing stronger relationships between the Black and Jewish communities before a crisis makes them necessary. We will come together with our colleagues in the Black Christian community and invite our congregations to learn from each other. We will create opportunities for shared study, worship, and community service. We will speak honestly about racism and antisemitism.

Ultimately, we will build the trust that allows us to call on each other when our communities are hurting.

Relationships require intention, humility, and time. They also require both communities to reject the idea that advocating for someone else diminishes our ability to defend our own people. We will not always see the world in the same way. But we can promise not to leave each other alone in it.

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