

LIVELY OPINION

The crudity of anti-Semitism in the NAACP is beyond the pale. It can still get it right.

By BEN COHEN

Special to the Intermountain Jewish News

Imagine the following scenario:

- The regional director of a mainstream Jewish organization in a city that is home to sizable Jewish and black communities shares ugly, racist caricatures of African Americans on social media.

- In a speech at a local synagogue, this same person denounces the influence of African Americans on our broader culture as “Satanic.”

- When this outrageous behavior becomes the subject of media attention, the regional director refuses to resign from his post and retains the backing of his organization.

The core ethics of every American Jewish organization would be violated by such expressions of naked racial hatred, and the person responsible would be suspended immediately and, most likely, fired.

Not so in the inverse version of this imagined example. In Philadelphia, the local president of the NAACP, Rodney Muhammad, has offered only a grudging semi-apology, alongside an adamant refusal to step down from his post after a grotesquely anti-Semitic image that he shared on his Facebook page garnered wide attention (IJN, July 31).

In the two-week long furor that

followed, the NAACP remained mum on Muhammad’s provocations at the same time that Pennsylvania’s governor, its attorney general and local black and Jewish leaders were calling on Muhammad to do the right thing — to step down.

NAACP takes two weeks to say it’s ‘disappointed’

On Aug. 6, the NAACP finally broke its silence. In a statement that was emailed to the **Philadelphia Tribune**, its national spokeswoman, Austyn Ross, relayed that the organization’s national leadership was “saddened and deeply disappointed by the harm caused by Mr. Muhammad’s actions” and that Muhammad “now recognizes the offensive nature of the imagery and post.”

“Hate speech has no place at the NAACP, and such language and imagery are reprehensible,” Ross said in the statement.

To evaluate the NAACP response, we need to step back for a moment and revisit Rodney Muhammad’s presence on social media.

The Facebook post that got him

into trouble showed the faces of three celebrities who recently made anti-Semitic statements (Ice Cube, Nick Cannon and DeSean Jackson) above a cartoon of a hook-nosed Jew wearing an evil grin and rubbing his hands gleefully.

This is exactly the kind of image one would expect to find on a neo-Nazi website, since exactly the same kind of image of Jews was promoted in the gutter press of Nazi Germany itself.

When a Jewish person encounters such an image, that is often the immediate connection that is made. If it is accompanied by fear, this is because of the knowledge of where these vile images led in the recent past.

I doubt that Rodney Muhammad grasps this fact. As a follower of the Nation of Islam, he will doubtless deflect the charge of appropriating Nazi imagery by referring to the views of his master, Louis Farrakhan, on the Holocaust of six million Jews. According to Farrakhan, who pals around with Holocaust deniers among other conspiracy

kooks, the Holocaust was just another Jewish swindle.

“International bankers financed Hitler and poor Jews died while big Jews were at the root of what you call the Holocaust,” Farrakhan declared in 1995.

“Little Jews died while big Jews made money. Little Jews were turned into soap while big Jews washed themselves with it.”

It’s hard to think of an accusation filthier than one that accuses a nation of slaughtering its own for the purpose of making money. Yet that is what Farrakhan believes, and it is therefore what Muhammad believes and will continue to believe as long as he remains in the Nation of Islam.

In case there was any doubt about Muhammad’s opinion of Jews, it should be pointed out that his record of anti-Semitic agitation stretches beyond a single post on Facebook.

In a post on Twitter defending Farrakhan’s July 4 message, Muhammad reached for the charge of deicide — the belief that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. “The Sahedrin (sic) shout to create mob psychology to crucify Jesus,” Muhammad posted.

Similarly, on the website of the Nation of Islam’s Mosque No. 12 Philadelphia, where Muhammad presides, many videos are available in which speakers matter-of-factly outline Farrakhan’s conceptualization of Hollywood’s hold on the American public as the “Synagogue of Satan.”

None of this is subtle — which is what makes the NAACP’s response so bitterly disappointing.

If Muhammad’s target had been Israel, the NAACP’s leadership would



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probably have retorted that “criticizing” the Jewish state isn’t the same thing as anti-Semitism. But no such feeble escape clause exists in this case.

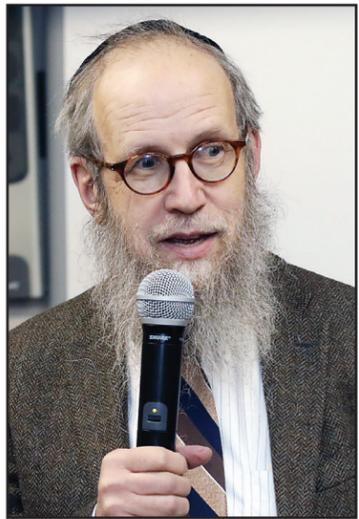
Whether the NAACP national leadership likes it or not, its point man in Philadelphia has embraced a view of the Jewish people that would sit happily with any and every white supremacist.

Another opportunity for the NAACP to get rid of Muhammad still lies ahead. On Aug. 15, its Pennsylvania state conference executive committee meets, which would allow its 30 members a platform to give Muhammad the boot. One NAACP supporter quoted by the **Tribune** acknowledged that there were “a lot of people in the state organization who want him out.”

Let us hope those people prevail. Meanwhile, Jewish organizations should freeze all contact with the NAACP until Rodney Muhammad is a part of its past.

When it comes to base and crude anti-Semitism like this, no other stance is credible.

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Hillel Goldberg

Can only a black person explain the black experience?

Can only a Jew explain the Jewish experience?

Can only an Arab explain Arab culture?

Alexandra Duncan certainly thinks so, at least when it comes to whites and blacks. She withdrew a novel because she is white and some of her novel presents a black perspective. That she, as a white person, originally thought she could write about blacks was a terrible mistake, she said in explaining her decision to shelve her novel, for which she had a large advance.

Did Duncan err in thinking that a white person cannot not accurately present a black perspective?

Clearly, a person who is black has a handle on what it is like to be black in a way that a non-black person does not have. This is intuitive.

Similarly, one who is Jewish has a handle on what it’s like to be Jewish that a non-Jew does not have.

However, this is far different from saying that it is a mistake for someone who is white to write about the black experience. It is not a mistake, since any single perspec-

tive is limited. To be black and to write about the black experience is to provide an insider perspective. It is unique. It is valuable. But it is not the only perspective. There is also the outsider perspective. This can add to, not supplant or distort, the insider perspective.

An analogy: the biographer. Who is best suited to delve into the essence of a person? Is it someone who had a personal relationship with the subject, or someone who did not? The answer is not either/or. The personal relationship provides a unique perspective, but also a limited one. An outsider can see things that an insider cannot see. It is precisely because of the limitations of both the insider and the outsider perspectives that a first-rate biographer will seek both.

Robert A. Caro’s unparalleled, multi-volume biography of former President Lyndon B. Johnson seeks out exhaustive interviews with people who were close to Johnson at every stage of his life. That is the insider perspective. Caro also sought out documents, records, interviews, radio and TV appearances, and speeches of Johnson. These supplemented the insider perspective. These provided a fuller picture of Johnson than those who knew him could never provide.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, provided the most powerful insight into the injustices of black slavery. Arguably, Stowe gave more power to the abolitionist movement than any other person. Not to mention, her book was a bestseller in many languages and went a long way to discredit-

ing slavery in other countries, too. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is one of the most influential books in American history ever written.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was white. Precisely what it was she portrayed in the black experience of slavery is subject to moods of interpretation that shift with the decades.

At a minimum, Stowe’s book bolstered the morale of black slaves when it was published in 1851, since Stowe’s depiction of black slavery revealed its horrors more accurately and powerfully than anyone else had ever done.

True enough, black slaves did not necessarily have the ability or opportunity to tell their own story, but that does not affect the capacity of white people to tell their story.

Had Harriet Stowe refrained from writing about black slavery, sentiment in the North for fighting to end slavery in the Civil War would have been set back dramatically.

An analogy: religious discipleship. Can only the disciple understand and describe the master? I understand this question as one who has written from both an insider and an outsider perspective about masters of the Torah.

As one who is not the disciple of a certain master, I have written as an outsider. Clearly, I did not understand the master as a disciple could. I knew this well because I myself have been a disciple of other masters of the Torah.

As a disciple of one master, I can provide the unique, insider perspective. Not as a disciple of another master, I can understand him in a way that disciples cannot.

Is the outsider perspective valuable? Indeed so, based on the reactions I received from disciples of various masters of Torah to the

lenged, modified or complemented by facts. Reason is expunged. Common language is impossible. Discourse is dead.

This is an especially dangerous approach if one attributes to the outsider perspective an inherent racism or claim of cultural superiority.

If that is how a black sees a

The inside perspective, the outside perspective

portraits I drew in *Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures from Eastern Europe*.

Does this mean that the outsider perspective is superior? No, it means it is different from the insider perspective. Each is limited, each is illuminating.

Can only Jews explain the Jewish experience? Paul Johnson, a gentile, wrote one of the finest short histories of the Jews. Was his perspective limited by virtue of him not being Jewish? True enough. Did his perspective provide insight that a Jewish writer could not? Also true enough.

Can only an Arab Muslim explain Arab and Islamic culture? The late Edward Said of Columbia University thought so. If you follow his logic, which is really the same logic that would have only blacks describe the black experience, or only Jews describe the Jewish experience, the conclusion is fallacious and divisive. The conclusion is: facts do not count. Evidence does not count.

For if only the insider perspective is legitimate, it can never be chal-

lenged, modified or complemented by facts. Reason is expunged. Common language is impossible. Discourse is dead. This is an especially dangerous approach if one attributes to the outsider perspective an inherent racism or claim of cultural superiority. If that is how a black sees a

white writer about blacks, or that is how a Jew sees a non-Jewish writer about Jews, or that is how an Arab sees a non-Arab writer about Arabs (Edward Said’s approach), then the outsider perspective is worse than wrong. It is malicious. It is unworthy of consideration. It contributes to evil.

It represents an unbridgeable intellectual and cultural chasm.

This is a possible end point of the view that only blacks can write about blacks or Jews about Jews.

That is actually the end point of Edward Said’s approach. He imputes inherent racism to any non-Arab, non-Islamic writer about Arabs and Islam.

This is why he dictates an interloper status to Jews in the Middle East and requires the dismantlement of Israel.

But, in truth, there is no necessarily unbridgeable chasm in discourse between races, religions and cultures. There is, rather, both the insider perspective and the outsider perspective.

Both are legitimate.

Both have their place.

Both work.

VIEW FROM DENVER

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